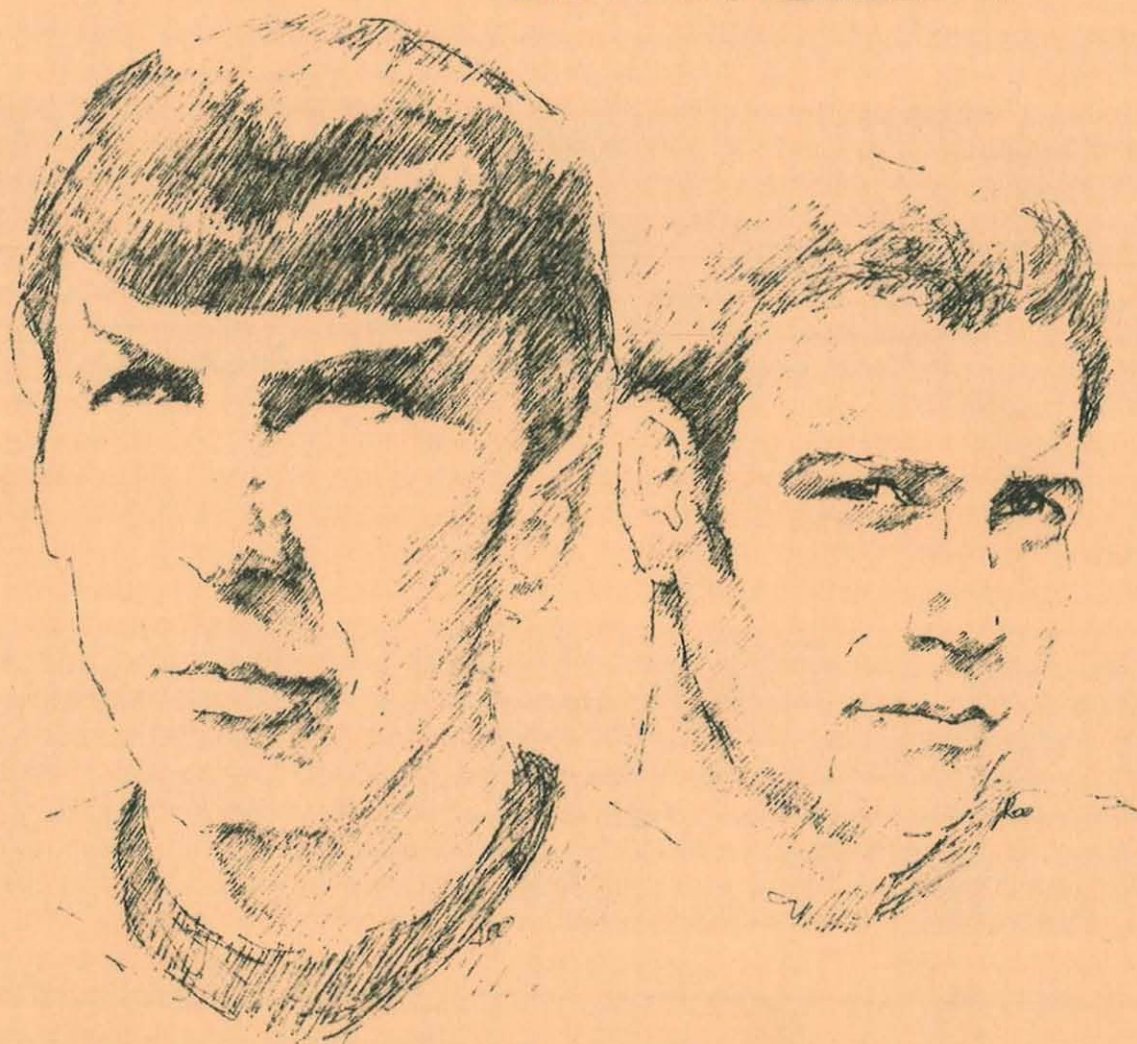


VARIATIONS

ON A THEME **4**



Valerie Piacentini

& Sheila Clark

a
STAR TREK
fanzine

VARIATIONS ON A THEME 4

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A STAG publication

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In Kraith Collected we met Commodore Spock, from another universe. His Kirk has been killed, and Spock, confused and unhappy, having discovered the existence of other universes, is trying to find a replacement for his own lost Kirk. However, he misinterprets half-understood data that has been transmitted to him through his sensor equipment, and Kirk resents his interference; when his own Spock comes to rescue him, he goes gladly, leaving the Commodore doubly alone.

We were concerned over the plight of the Commodore, and wondered how he might continue his search; the Variations on a Theme universe arose from our discussions on how he might do so.

In Variations 1, his equipment now improved, he detected the presence of a Kirk who did indeed need his help. That Kirk was the young, shy and sensitive First Officer to a Spock who had never adjusted to his Human blood, and who reacted to his maladjustment by treating Kirk with sadistic cruelty, using him as a sexual partner in spite of Kirk's horror of being treated in this way.

Spock set out to rescue Kirk. In the process, the Captain was killed, and Spock remained in that universe, taking the Captain's place. The body was left in the Commodore's original universe.

The remainder of Variations 1 was taken up with the beginnings of Kirk's rehabilitation, and finished with a reasonably self-confident Kirk adjusting to a new life without fear.

In Variations 2, Spock was obliged to go 'home' to visit 'his' parents. Unfortunately, the Captain had accidentally left a personal tape in his room, and his father had heard it. He believed that Spock was illtreating Kirk and tried to kill him; in saving Spock, Kirk was injured, and Sarek had to be told the truth. To their amazement he accepted Spock as his son and that worry was relieved.

Sam Kirk then came aboard the ship as a crewman. On a mission to Deneva, Sam Kirk, who had deserted Kirk as a child, again deserted him, but this time Spock was there to rescue him.

In Variations 3, Spock ran into problems with his family council. Although Sarek knew the truth and accepted it, the rest of the family did not. If they did discover the truth, Kirk might very well be called to account for killing the Captain, and punished for it with the full rigour of Vulcan law. The truth therefore had to be kept hidden.

Spock's family council insisted that he marry. However, in this universe the bonding ceremony triggered off pon farr - and it was established in Kraith Collected that the Commodore was immune to pon farr. He would therefore be unable to consummate a Vulcan bonding, his wife would complain, the imposture would be detected, and Kirk would be in danger.

Kirk also, because of the sexual assaults he had suffered from the Captain, was impotent - psychologically so - and afraid to enter into any sort of personal relationship with anyone apart from Spock.

Realising the situation that both men were in, McCoy suggested that they bond - something that was still legal, although rarely done. The family, although not particularly happily, conceded that such a bonding was permissible, and Spock and Kirk were legally bonded.

In the same issue, Gary Mitchell came on board as a navigator. Basically lazy, he finally settled down to become a steady, uninspired member of the crew.

We plan to do at least two more issues of Variations on a Theme, and work has already begun on #5.

Thanks to those of you who have sent us in poems as creative response to the series - this time they've been printed in as near chronological order of events as possible. Thanks too to the many of you who have sent in comments and suggestions for possible continuations. We are bearing those in mind for future issues.

After all - the story is by no means finished yet!

May 1980

A handwritten signature in dark ink, consisting of the letters 'SR' followed by a stylized 'Q' or 'O' with a horizontal line through it.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, written in a cursive style, appearing to read 'Valerie'.

We would like to apologise for the change of type face that occurs on P29. This was due to a fault in the electric typewriter, and we didn't have time to wait the week that it took for it to be repaired if we were to meet the May publication date.

AND YET by Ann Flegg

You flinch away like a frightened child
 And yet, if only once you'd smiled
 With loving tenderness meant only for me,
 I might have been gentle and kind to thee.

And yet, I remember your terror and shame
 And the pleasure it gives me to cause you pain.
 Your spirit submissive, defeated and chained -
 I branded you, you're mine, my slave.

And yet, you hold me tightly bound,
 You, born of an inferior race.
 I am ashamed of my need for you -
 What are you, that makes me love you?

++ ++ ++ ++ ++ ++

IN REMEMBERING by Gene S. Delapenia

It's not so much that you found pleasure in my fear,
 For I could have loved you even then
 If you had come to me in tenderness
 With soft touches and gentle hands.
 But your only touch was brutal and hard,
 Your only feeling was shame and hate
 For that other self you've hidden deep inside.
 And now, when it is too late I find
 You had caring for me despite yourself;
 But that was not enough, and it is too late.

++ ++ ++ ++ ++ ++

END OF A SEARCH by Ann Flegg

Long years have passed
 Since last I knew
 The companionship of you.

I searched a thousand shadows
 Of many different universes,
 Enduring the disappointments,
 Carried on by a slender hope
 That one day I would be successful.

And I did find you -
 Almost too late,
 A tormented victim of the Captain.

I freed you from the cage
 He had imprisoned you in,
 I watched as you slowly rebuilt
 What he had so nearly destroyed -
 Yourself.

And now at last I have truly found
 The companion I once knew
 So many years ago.

I survived his death;
 I could not survive yours.
 My Kirk - now and always.

++ ++ ++ ++ ++ ++

SANCTUARY by D. Booker

Space is wide and deep, endless as the grave,
 But you and I - bound by love,
 A golden band from soul to soul -
 Stand together against the dark.
 My dear companion, chosen brother,
 Words are too weak. Look into my heart
 And know what you are to me;
 The object of my every desire.
 Shield and tower, sword and buckler,
 Balm for all pains, perfect quietude,
 All in the touch of your hand,
 The smile of your soft eyes, tender for me.
 A necessary commitment, this narrow band I wear,
 Symbol of an ancient fidelity,
 Vows sworn in secret ceremony.
 In your love have I made my peace.

++ ++ ++ ++ ++ ++

BONDMATE by Beryl Turton

This joining as one, this bonding,
 Am I Vulcan,
 or am I Human.
 I feel both, my friend,
 as you are.
 You have shown me Life
 as I need to live it now.
 Gone are the dark corners
 where I used to hide myself.
 You have given me back my Life.
 Why?
 You found me a cowardly shell when
 first we met, I was
 His lover, when he needed me,
 a cruel, alien Vulcan -
 Your alternate self.
 Was it because I looked like your Kirk?
 If it was, that's all I mirrored of him.
 And yet you brought me back,
 taught me to respect myself.
 What do I feel now - love?
 Love for a Vulcan...
 I wonder if now I offered myself
 as I did once before,
 Would you still feel hurt, disgusted
 as you were then?
 I love you, Spock.
 Love can be all things, loyalty,
 A trusting, an understanding...
 You have made me safe,
 I am your Bondmate.
 I could not choose before, he took me,
 but now, now I can choose.
 Spock, I love you...

++ ++ ++ ++ ++ ++

We made the right choice
For this bond is more precious to me
Than my very life itself
And when you offered
With your clear eyes fixed on mine
To make this a bonding true, then
I was certain of your trust
And of my love.
Yes, this was the right choice
For both of us.

Gene S. Delapenia



VARIATIONS ON A THEME 4

Commander Kirk, First Officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise, was frowning slightly as he made his way to sickbay. The call the senior nurse had made sounded urgent; Tamura was clearly distressed about something. Yet she had said 'I think you'd better come to sickbay to hear about this.' Not 'Dr. McCoy thinks'.

Receiving the call, Spock had glanced across at his second in command. Everything on the bridge was routine at the moment; the ship was four days out from Starbase 8 on the first leg of a routine mission to give several colonies their annual Starfleet medical check; there had been no emergencies of any kind. Kirk glanced back at his Captain with a slight shrug that said, 'It can't be much.'

Spock apparently agreed. "Check it out, Mr. Kirk."

"Yes, Captain."

So now Kirk was making his way from the elevator to sickbay, wondering what had happened to make Nurse Tamura call the bridge.

As the door opened to admit him, Kirk heard the voices raised in anger. First McCoy's, then the girl's, quieter but determined. Her words reached the First Officer clearly.

"I am a nurse first, and a member of the crew of the Enterprise second, Dr. McCoy!"

McCoy seemed to become aware of Kirk's intrusion, and obviously altered what he had been about to say. "I'll give them a full report," he said, almost dully, his anger visibly fading. "I promise."

She looked intently at him, then nodded and turned away. As the door closed behind her, Kirk said quietly, "That was some scene, Bones."

Instead of following the obvious line of thought McCoy said abruptly, "I've just finished the crew's routine medicals, Jim."

"And?" If McCoy didn't want to talk about his argument with his head nurse, Kirk was the last man to push him about it.

"The crew is all in perfect health - with one exception."

Something in McCoy's tone half alerted Kirk. "Bad?"

"Terminal."

Terminal! There were almost no terminal ailments now, although Kirk knew that in the past many now curable diseases had been fatal. "Who is it?"

As if Kirk hadn't spoken, McCoy went on. "He has one year to live - at the outside chance."

"Who is it?" Kirk asked again, more sharply.

"The ship's Chief Medical Officer."

It took a moment to sink in. "You?"

"I'll be able to work most efficiently in the time left if you can keep it to yourself, Jim."

You don't want pity, Kirk thought. "Spock will have to be told. I don't see any reason to inform anyone else. What is the condition?"

"Xenopolycythemia."

Kirk had come across a mention of it in one of his scientific journals. It was one of the rare blood diseases that only attacked space-going personnel; only about one in twenty thousand was affected. Because it was so rare, attempts to isolate its cause and to find a cure were sporadic. And even if Bones, with a personal interest in finding a cure, were to devote all his spare time to researching it, he was extremely unlikely to come up with anything useful in the

three or four months he had before the debilitating effects of the disease caused so much damage that recovery was impossible. The knowledge made a reply impossible. He could only look helplessly at his dying friend in silent sympathy.

"It was serious then," Spock said as he entered Kirk's cabin in response to his First Officer's call.

Kirk nodded. "Xenopolycythemia - have you heard of it?"

"A rare blood ailment," Spock replied.

Bones has it."

Spock nodded, hardly surprised. "This is one occasion when my previous experiences are of value. Fortunately, we are not too far from the co-ordinates..."

"Co-ordinates?" Kirk asked blankly.

"This happened in the other universe," Spock explained. "We came upon a race who had a cure, in time to benefit our McCoy. This time I know the situation on Yonada, so the problems..."

"Yonada?" Kirk cut in, anxiety sharpening his tone.

"Yes - Jim, what is it?"

Kirk ran his tongue over suddenly dry lips. "Spock - we found the world of Yonada a few months before you came here. It was a plague world, only a handful of immune carriers left alive. We beamed one aboard, kept her in quarantine in sickbay until the Captain found out who they were and why they were there. Their sun had gone nova, they were searching for a new world to settle...but every one they came to, they had been forced to leave; they suffered from agoraphobia as a result of always living in a fairly enclosed space, and none of them had been able to adjust to living under the open sky. Eventually they had stopped looking, living perfectly contentedly in their artificial world until the disease struck. But their world was on a collision course with a heavily populated colony planet. It might have been possible to alter Yonada's course, but the Captain wouldn't risk sending anyone aboard, not even a volunteer, to find out, and the handful of survivors had forgotten all they ever knew about controlling their vessel...even: their records had been lost when the main computer malfunctioned. At any rate, the Captain beamed the woman back then destroyed Yonada completely - he might have taken the risk if there'd been any chance of gain, but he wouldn't even evacuate the few survivors. He said that they were disease carriers who couldn't be settled anywhere - that it was kinder to destroy them with their world." Kirk's voice shook slightly. "Perhaps he was right...though whatever his real motive, 'kindness' was surely not really part of it."

"Nothing was salvaged?"

Kirk shook his head. "Nothing."

It was almost a week before Spock brought the subject up again. Kirk had seen very little of him during that time; even his duty hours were mostly spent in his quarters, and the 'Do not disturb' sign was apparently permanently lit. Although puzzled, Kirk accepted his friend's withdrawal tranquilly; Spock said he had work to do - if he felt he required several days solitude to do it, that was up to him.

Finally Spock called the bridge, where Kirk had the con.

"Mr. Kirk - I would like a word with you in my quarters."

"On my way, Captain." Kirk flicked off the intercom. "You have the con, Mr. Sulu." He strode confidently into the elevator.

He entered Spock's cabin in response to the Vulcan's call and stopped dead,

staring at the transporter-like structure that occupied half of the living and working area.

"What on earth...?"

"If McCoy is to be saved, Jim, drastic measures are necessary. I have rebuilt the machinery that let me enter this universe; it is attuned to what is left of the equipment I left behind - when I came through permanently I destroyed the doorway, and though much of the machinery would have been damaged beyond reconstruction when that happened, my tests show that enough remains that I can focus on it and return to it. I will go through, find the other McCoy, obtain the cure from him, and return. It will take a few days, but it should not take too long - when I left, McCoy was based on Vulcan, running his xenomedical school there, and I doubt that he would leave; nor would he retire, for he is the sort of man who 'dies in harness'. If he has left for any reason, I will come back and let you know, then go through again to follow him."

"Dangerous," Kirk said.

"Yes - but it is our McCoy's only chance."

"Our' McCoy...not 'your' - 'our'. Such a little thing, and yet so emotionally satisfying as a reaffirmation of Spock's commitment to this universe.

"Yes," Kirk said. "And I see that you must be the one to go - you know where the...the xenomedical school is. In that respect, the other universe is more advanced than this one."

"Such a school may be started here in time," Spock answered quietly. "It was begun by Dr. McCoy in the other universe. With Captain Kirk dead and myself promoted away from the Enterprise, he chose also to retire from active service. His medical knowledge of many races filled a specialised need; he realised that space-going doctors required a wider range of experience than was offered by Starfleet Academy, excellent though the medical course given there was. So... At first he took only a few students in his home, but word spread, and he had to find more spacious accommodation. Then he had to find more teachers. The staff he selected was made up of experienced Starfleet medical officers either retired or invalided out through injury or failing a routine medical examination. The success of his methods led to Starfleet agreeing to finance his school, and he resumed his career in Starfleet. His primary concern is the medical school, but he also holds - or held - the position of Head of the Medical Section of the Vulcan Starbase."

"I see."

Spock smiled suddenly and unexpectedly. "One thing I do remember about the treatment of xenopolycythemia - I teased the other McCoy rather unmercifully about it at first, I'm afraid, until I realised I was being unnecessarily cruel - he must stop eating meat. Our McCoy might be helped by doing that now."

It took a moment to sink in. "Poor Bones!"

"He can still eat the flesh of poultry or fish," Spock added, "but not red meat, ever again. I should have remembered that a week ago. Although the cure is complete, susceptibility to the condition remains, and a controlled diet is necessary."

"I think Bones has been off his food anyway since he diagnosed it," Kirk told him. "When I've seen him in the mess, he's been nibbling at things like omelettes." He looked straight at Spock, knowing that they were now talking, at least in part, to waste time. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes."

"Spock - our link." Kirk touched his forehead. "Will I...be able to reach you?"

The Vulcan considered for a moment. "I do not know, Jim - I think it unlikely. An incomplete bond, stretched between two universes... Do not be

alarmed if you cannot touch my thoughts."

Kirk held out his hand. "Be careful, my friend."

The Vulcan nodded as he took it. "Very careful," he said. "If all goes well I will require only two days, but I may be longer if McCoy is away in another part of Vulcan, as he sometimes is."

"I'll try not to worry."

The firm handclasp loosened; Spock stepped into the 'transporter chamber' of his device, fastening a small box to his belt; Kirk knew it was the key for his return.

"Depress the green button," Spock instructed. Kirk obeyed; the Vulcan shimmered for a moment, and disappeared.

Not until Spock was gone did Kirk realise that he had given no instructions to cover the period he would be away; as far as the ship was concerned, Spock was still engaged in the routine work that had been occupying his attention for some days - only Kirk knew otherwise. It did mean, however, that should any emergency arise, its resolution sat firmly on the First Officer's shoulders. Kirk swallowed nervously, then straightened resolutely. Spock trusted him to look after the ship. He would not fail.

The days dragged past - first the two that Spock had estimated was the least time he would need...then a third...a fourth...a fifth. By the sixth day Kirk was almost frantic with worry.

'If he has left, I will come back and let you know,' Spock had said. That he had not meant that McCoy was still there...the delay indicated that either he had been hard to get hold of - or that Spock was in trouble.

Spock was in trouble. Kirk was sure of it.

The small box that was the key to his return should operate anywhere, and Spock would be drawn back here. So he had not operated it. The momentary fear that it had not worked Kirk dismissed as not worth consideration. It was not, after all, in any way experimental, but a reconstruction of the device that had brought Spock safely here in the first place.

No. Spock was in trouble. That meant someone would have to go after him... and the only person who could go was Kirk himself. No-one else knew the truth except McCoy, and he certainly could not leave the ship in his condition. It had to be Kirk.

Yet...Spock had left the ship in his charge. How could he abandon that responsibility?

How could he abandon Spock?

There was no choice. It only remained to think up a good reason for handing command over to Charlene Masters.

Research?

It would serve him for now, as it had so frequently done in the past...but for Spock?

He could, of course, involve McCoy...a disease, contagious, requiring isolation, confinement to quarters...but he did not want to approach McCoy. That would mean giving an explanation, and he did not want to arouse hopes that might prove false.

Kirk sat, gathering his thoughts as Spock had taught him, considering the possibilities as logically as he could. He quickly reached one positive conclusion. He must confide in Masters.

Not fully, of course, but fully enough for her to appreciate just what Spock had done, and why. Then together they could enlist McCoy's help with some story of a research trip gone wrong. But then McCoy would certainly wonder why Spock had gone back into the other universe... What reason could he give; it would be so much easier if, like Masters, McCoy did not know of Spock's alternate universe origins!

Or... Don't tell McCoy yet. Tell Masters, then go; leaving her to tell McCoy the bare facts that had been revealed to her. It would be easier for him than lying; Masters could simply say she didn't know what research they were engaged on, and McCoy was far less likely to suspect her of telling him less than the exact truth. She could then call on McCoy's aid to cover up their disappearance. Even Starfleet Command would not question the word of a Chief Medical Officer, and the odds were favourable that on such a routine mission no-one would want to contact them anyway.

There was plenty of time, too; checking the colonies would take some three months before they had to return to Starbase, even to transfer McCoy off. The initial progress of xenopolycythemia was slow, and because of the frequency of checks had been discovered quickly; only in the final months did the build up of poisons it caused weaken the patient to the point of incapacitation, although he would soon be unable to hide his growing weakness from the rest of the medical staff. The colonies were well inside Federation space - there should be no emergencies. But he - and Spock - had to be covered.

His mind made up, Kirk reached for the intercom - then paused, even as he touched it. No. Better for him to visit Masters in her cabin. That way there would be no evidence that First Officer and Chief Engineer had prediscussed... anything.

If Charlene Masters was surprised when she discovered the identity of her visitor she hid it well.

"Yes, Jim?" she asked quietly, a hand moving to freeze the image of the technical diagram in the viewer. There was clearly something on his mind - that habit of twisting his ring... was he even conscious of it? she wondered.

"Charlene, I need your help." It was an abrupt statement that sounded almost forced, and she frowned slightly.

"Anything I can do, of course," she agreed, gesturing to a chair. Kirk sank into it. He seemed to be thinking.

"What is it, Jim?" she asked as he showed no sign of going on.

"Spock," Kirk said. "He's in trouble, Charlene - I'm sure of it."

"If he won't tell you, Jim, he won't tell anyone," she said gently.

"It's not as easy as that," Kirk told her.

She waited patiently for him to go on, but he seemed to be having difficulty in finding words. Finally he said, still abruptly, "This concerns McCoy too, Charlene. He asked me not to tell anyone...but before I can explain this whole thing to you I have to let you know. Please - you must keep the knowledge to yourself."

Puzzled, she nodded, and Kirk continued. "Don't even let Bones know you know."

"All right," she agreed.

He took a deep breath. "Bones is dying, Charlene. Xenopolycythemia." Seeing her uncomprehending stare, he explained. "It's a rare blood disease, a sort of inability in the blood to rid itself of body poisons, the corpuscles can't carry oxygen round the body as efficiently as normal, and there's no cure - it's too rare for anyone to have been allocated funds to research it."

Shock showed clearly on her face. "Oh God!"

"He has - at most - a year to live. If a cure could be found inside the next three months or so, he could recover fully, but after that there's too much damage been done to the vital organs - even if he lived he'd be a permanent invalid. Without a cure, death is inevitable. He'll stay with the ship until we get back to Starbase 8 - then he'll be transferred off, ostensibly to a shore posting, in actual fact..." His voice faded and he swallowed the lump that threatened to choke him.

Masters looked keenly at her senior officer for a moment. "All right - where does Spock fit into this?"

"Several years ago, Spock did some...personal research into the theory that other universes exist." Kirk spoke carefully now. "He never published his findings because he came to the conclusion that the whole subject could be terribly dangerous, and he deliberately destroyed everything - equipment, records, the lot - that had any connection with it. However, before he did that he actually visited at least two other universes - possibly more.

He found many similarities, with much the same people...relationships, personalities, even events sometimes varied slightly, and it was this in part that created the danger. Can you imagine an unscrupulous man, prevented here from doing as he wished, going into another universe, taking his counterpart's place...?"

"Yes," she agreed. "An interesting technical achievement, but... Go on."

"During the time Spock spent in one particular universe, he came across a mention of a cure for xenopolycythemia."

"He rebuilt his equipment?"

No wonder she had risen to Chief Engineer, he thought; her mind was remarkably sharp.

"Yes. He went through a week ago, expecting to require at most two or three days. He promised to come back and let me know if he discovered he would be longer. He has not come back."

She thought about it for a moment. "How many people know of this?"

"Bones knows about the earlier experiments, but not about this attempt; we decided not to tell him in case we failed. And now you. Nobody else knows."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Someone will have to go after Spock. Since I know most about what he planned, it will have to be me. But I can't go without your help, Charlene. I need you to take command of the Enterprise, and also to cover up for us somehow should any new orders come through - though I don't expect that to happen. Bones can probably help you cover for us - except that he mustn't know why we went through to the other universe. I don't want to see him before I go - I can't lie convincingly, he'd know I was hiding something - but all you need tell him is that I said Spock was in trouble in the alternate universe, and I went after him. He'll understand that."

"Have you any idea how long you'll be?"

"No. It all depends on so many factors." He did not add that there was only one return mechanism - and Spock had it. If he failed to find his friend he would not be able to return.

"All right, I'll take over, enlist McCoy's help and cover for you as long as possible. Just try not to be too long, huh?"

Kirk smiled, a mixture of relief and gratitude. "Thanks, Charlene. I won't forget this."

"When do you mean to go?"

"Now seems as good a time as any."



They went along the deserted corridors of the ship's night without meeting anyone and Kirk opened the door of the Captain's cabin. Charlene looked at the hastily-built transporter-like equipment with interest. Kirk indicated the appropriate button.

"Press that green button," he instructed. As she nodded he crossed to the 'transporter chamber' and entered it. "Ready."

She pressed the button. For a moment she thought it was not going to work, for a moment Kirk was aware of fear, fear of the unknown; then he shimmered out of sight.

"Good luck, Jim," she murmured softly; then, eyes alight with interest, she turned her attention to examining, without touching, the machinery that half-filled the room.

Kirk regained awareness to find himself standing in a cellar, dimly lit by a fading emergency light in the ceiling. The furniture could be seen only as

dim shapes in the faint twilight of the room.

There must be a light switch by the door, Kirk thought, staring round in search of it. A rectangle, slightly darker than the rest of the wall, attracted his attention; he moved to it. Yes, a door. He ran his hand down the wall beside it and found the switch.

He blinked in the sudden brightness, his eyes readjusting, to look round with some interest...and froze. A figure was sitting at a console a little to one side of him. He moved forward.

Mercifully, the eyes were shut. He could not have borne it otherwise.

There was no blood staining the Commodore's shirt; the Captain's blood had ceased to flow even before Spock withdrew the knife that had killed his counterpart. But at this distance, Kirk could plainly see the blackened blood encrusting the wound on the corpse's neck.

The body had mummified in the dry heat that penetrated even this closed cellar. Always thin, the Captain's face had not been altered to any extent by the mummification, but death had relaxed it into a strange gentleness that the Captain had never shown while he was alive.

Kirk looked at his dead tormentor, trembling with shock - he had forgotten that Spock had left the body here. And remembering.

Remembering pain. Remembering humiliation.

Remembering the Captain's last words as he died.

Remembering two tapes; one, a message intended for him; one, a personal record the Captain had never intended anyone to hear.

"I'm sorry," Kirk said quietly. "I could have loved you - but you made sure I would only fear you. Is it so surprising that at last you made me fear you too much? Perhaps in another universe, with a stronger Kirk, you would have found the companionship you denied to us...and I do wish you could have known it. You were never happy, were you?"

He studied the body for a moment longer, then turned away.

The door opened easily at his touch, and Kirk found himself in the little-used area where old Starbase records were stored - it seemed that in this universe, as in his own, the bureaucratic mind discarded nothing, remote though the possibility was that it would be needed again. Spock had told him that the warning devices he had set proved that no-one else had ventured this far into the cellars in all the time he had used his hidden base.

From Spock's description, and his own limited knowledge of the Vulcan Starbase complex in his own universe, Kirk knew that the greatest danger lay in being seen as he emerged from the hidden room. Having reached this far, he could mingle with the headquarters staff who went about their duties even in the Commodore's private residence, his uniform rendering him simply another faceless unit in the busy life of the base. A sudden impulse had made him lift a discarded clipboard from the cellar, and he now carried it in such a way that it concealed the ship's insignia on his shirt - among the base staff might be someone who would recognise the Enterprise arrowhead, and know that none of her officers had any business on Vulcan.

Luck was with him; or perhaps it was simply that the lower levels of the base were seldom used, but he saw no-one until he emerged into a busy corridor and joined the flow of hurrying men and women. Mentally, Kirk blessed the attitude that assumed that a man in uniform who acted as though he had a right to be where he was, probably did. Assuming an intent, serious expression he walked briskly along the corridor, passed unchallenged through a side door, and emerged onto the open area of the base.

Here he paused, considering his next move. The main gate would be guarded, he knew, and it seemed foolish to risk being stopped - sometimes a security check covered those leaving, as well as entering, the restricted area of a base. It would perhaps be wiser to take the longer, but less sensitive, route across the spaceport which served both the base and the civilian traffic, and to leave the area by the unguarded exit into the township.

Not in his uniform, though. That would be too conspicuous, Kirk thought. The presence of a Starfleet officer in such a quarter would be noticed, remembered, and perhaps mentioned in the hearing of those whose attention would be undesirable.

Just ahead of him a group of mechanics emerged from a hangar belonging to one of the private spacelines; the sight gave him an idea and he slipped inside, heading for the locker room.

As he had hoped, several pairs of engineering coveralls were lying around; choosing the one nearest his size Kirk pulled it on and surveyed himself in the mirror with a grin of satisfaction - the act had transformed him from a Starfleet officer into a nameless and unimportant civilian technician.

Confidently he left the hangar and joined the steady flow of people heading off the base; the bored guard on duty scarcely lifted his eyes as they passed, though Kirk had seen him moments before challenge someone who sought to enter.

Safely on the street, Kirk made his way to a video booth and consulted the directory for McCoy's address; for a moment he was tempted to call ahead, but decided against it - there was no guarantee that his call would be put through to the Head of Medicine on the Vulcan base, and he dared not give his name. Better, he thought, to make personal contact with McCoy if he could, and rely on the shock of his physical appearance to gain him speech with the doctor.

Memorising the address, and the route to it, Kirk set off to walk. He had not thought, in his haste, to bring any cash with him - if indeed the money of his universe was the same as in this - and in this universe he had no credit number to give.

His way led through the least reputable part of the township. It was early evening, and the lights of the drinking dens and brothels were already twinkling into garish life. For the most part he managed to avoid the revellers who thronged the streets, but at one point, as he stepped out of the way of a staggering drunk, he collided heavily with a very tall, thickset man who was forced to clutch at him to prevent the lighter man from sprawling into the road.

"Sorry, youngster, I..."

Kirk looked up enquiringly as the voice faded. He had never met the stranger, he was certain - he could not have forgotten the bright, cunning eyes or the distinctive moustache - yet the man was staring at him in open-mouthed astonishment.

That was the other thing he had forgotten, he realised; McCoy was not the only man on Vulcan who might recognise the face of Jim Kirk...though to be sure, his youth would be confusing...

"Excuse me, sir." Since the man seemed disinclined to release him, Kirk wriggled free of his grip and stepped aside, walking on quickly. He glanced back only once, to see the stranger staring after him. Thankfully, he ducked down a side street, and was soon hidden from the man's sight.

On the main street a thoughtful figure raised a hand to stroke his drooping moustache as he followed the retreating youth with speculative eyes. After a moment he turned towards the bar he had been about to enter, hesitated, then walked slowly away.

Suddenly he felt very old and tired; memories of younger, happier days, daring chances, grandiose schemes that had somehow never worked out quite as he had intended, filled his mind, called to life by a pair of hauntingly-familiar

eyes. So long ago... Purely a chance resemblance, of course... Harcourt Fenton Mudd had never believed in ghosts - and he wasn't about to begin now.

After a few minutes Kirk began to doubt the wisdom of his detour. The street he was following was in the roughest section of the town, and he hurried along, his eyes lowered, hoping to come soon to a cross-street that would take him back on the way to McCoy's.

From open doorways soft voices called to him, promising him a variety of pleasures; once arms entwined around his neck, seeking to draw him in, a proposition to which he reacted instinctively by pulling away and almost running from the sound of the mocking laughter that followed him.

It was with considerable relief that Kirk turned into a quieter street, but it seemed that a different danger awaited him. He was just passing beneath a street lamp when a burly man in the uniform of one of the civil spacelines stepped out and blocked his path.

"Just off the ship, kid?"

"I...I'm going to meet friends..." Kirk backed away nervously, then realised that three more men had come up behind him. "They'll be waiting..."

"You can spare a few minutes, surely?" The man was gazing at the shoulder of Kirk's coveralls. "I see you're an engineering technician - just what we need."

"I already have a berth, thanks." Kirk knew a moment's relief at the realisation that the man had not, as he feared, accosted him in search of a sexual partner, but he was well aware of the risk of being forcibly abducted to serve on one of the less strictly run civil ships; and once he vanished into enforced service it would be months before he could even try to escape, far too late to be of any help to Spock - and certainly too late for McCoy.

With a courage born of desperation and the need to avoid capture at all costs, Kirk seized the only chance he had, that of surprise. He dodged aside, avoiding the clutching hands, and fled as fast as he could, aware that his chances of finding help, or even a safe hiding place in this area, were very slim indeed.

The Vulcan guard executed a punctilious salute, and received in exchange an absent-minded wave from the muffled figure who approached the main gate of the Security area of the Starbase.

"Do you wish an escort, Doctor?"

"An escort?" Surgeon-Admiral Leonard McCoy, Director of the Institute of Xenomedicine on Vulcan, Chief Medical Officer for the Starbase, snorted indignantly. "What the blue blazes would I want an escort for, Sandor?"

The Vulcan raised a resigned eyebrow, wondering for the hundredth time how anyone as irascible and apparently disorganised as McCoy could contrive to remember the name of every member of the Starbase staff.

"Were you not aware, Doctor, that Commodore Sendak placed the entire base on full security 7.5 days ago? All key personnel are naturally provided with an escort if required.

"Well, I don't need one. I've been too busy to bother about Sendak's damned security drills. I'm going home, for the first time in a week, and I don't want to be bothered with any of your nonsense, Sandor. Go and guard someone important - all a doctor does is clear up the mess you fellows create. Goodnight to you."

"Goodnight, Doctor."

McCoy pulled the collar of his cloak closer around himself, and set off to

walk the short distance to the small house he had taken in the town, preferring to have his private dwelling outside the Starbase.

Despite the bitter cold his steps slowed as he found himself studying the glorious night sky of Vulcan. Strange, he thought, that after all these years this was where his career was ending, even stranger that he had learned to love this alien world, perhaps even to understand its people...a little.

His eyes, still intensely blue, clouded as his gaze rested on a small, dim star low in the heavens, an insignificant speck in the grandeur arched above him. His own sun...his and Jim's...and Spock's...

But Jim was twenty years dead, and Spock...

"Where the hell are you, you stubborn, irritating Vulcan?" he murmured aloud; despite his words, his voice was soft with grief.

Jim's last resting place was very close; his friend lay beneath Vulcan's red soil, for Spock had wished it so, and there was no-one else left on Earth to care where he was buried. Spock, though...Spock had vanished utterly three years ago, leaving no trace of his passing, and McCoy's grief was still fresh in his mind.

"Did you go to Jim? Was that it?" he whispered. "Couldn't you have told me? I'd have understood..."

Yes, he would have understood that, for after Jim's death the Vulcan had altered terribly. Not obviously - to anyone else he still seemed the controlled, emotionless Vulcan; but on occasions the mask had slipped, and McCoy had seen the bleak misery in the dark eyes.

Those years on the Enterprise... Spock had taken command because it was Jim's wish...and McCoy had remained at his side, partly because there was nowhere else to go, but mainly because each found a bitter comfort in the memories they shared - and a refuge from the one memory neither dared examine too closely, that of the mindless, terrified, pitiful thing that had whimpered out its short life in Spock's arms.

Then...that last voyage...McCoy absent attending a course in preparation for his eventual retirement from Starship service; Spock returning, his eyes vividly, terribly alive, taking command of the Starbase, an offer he had refused until now; only to plunge into months of mysterious, secretive research during which McCoy seldom saw his friend. Spock's collapse, the sudden despair that had overwhelmed him until McCoy felt the cold dread of losing him; the inexplicable recovery, the return to his obsessive secrecy...and the mysterious disappearance without word or sign.

Since then - nothing. Only an aging, lonely man who buried himself in his work to keep from howling his grief for the friends who had been dearer to him than any family.

Shaking his head, McCoy quickened his pace. He was passing through the civilian spaceport area, the usual sort of rough-and-ready town that seemed to spring up automatically to cater for the commercial space crews - and often Starfleet men on shore leave. The Vulcan authorities were not altogether happy at having such a complex on their territory, but reluctantly accepted that it was inevitable; in return the space crews confined their relaxation to this area, for the disciplined environment of the rest of Vulcan was not to their taste. Besides, why risk incurring the penalties of Vulcan law, when all that they required was available here?

Despite the roughness of the area, McCoy was safe enough - respect for his medical uniform protected him from assault - and his home, situated in its own grounds, was far enough from the bars and nightclubs to enjoy a measure of peace and quiet.

Absorbed in his memories McCoy threaded his way through the crowds thronging the streets, intent on a good time. One burly engineer in the uniform of a commercial spaceline collided with him, then apologised hastily as he recognised the medical insignia.

McCoy continued on, frowning as the man rejoined his companions. This group was completely sober, alert, looking round as though in search of something; and the doctor knew what it was.

The civilian crews were drifters, always changing employment when the fancy took them; and it was not unknown for a liner to be stranded if a crewman jumped ship. The simplest and easiest solution was to kidnap a replacement. It was the shanghai system of the old sailing days brought up-to-date, and although Starfleet had done its best to stamp out the practice, their efforts were fiercely resisted by the men themselves, who preferred to take a chance on being kidnapped rather than have their freedom curtailed by official registers and contracts - 'bureaucratic interference', they termed it.

With a sigh of relief McCoy turned into the alley that led to his house. The gate swung open at a touch, and again he frowned, certain that he had closed it last time he left; then he shrugged - the medical insignia was repeated in the design of the gate, perhaps a patient had been seeking help.

He lingered for a moment in the garden, taking a last look at the night sky, then turned to place his hand on the identification plate beside the front door. As he did so a movement in the deep shadows of the porch made him start.

"Who's there?" he demanded sharply.

"Dr. McCoy?" The voice was faint, hesitant, disturbingly familiar.

"I'm McCoy. Who are you? Do you need a doctor?"

"I need... I must speak with you." The voice was more confident now, but still breathless.

McCoy hesitated. "Call my office and make an appointment," he growled. "I'm off duty now."

"No, please! You must listen to me..." His unseen companion broke off as voices sounded in the alley outside. "Don't let them see me! They're looking for me, to take me aboard their ship... I eluded them, but they must have followed me... Please, let me in! I've got to talk to you!"

"I don't know about that." McCoy was doubtful. Admit a stranger into his home at this hour? Although as a doctor he should be safe enough, there were a lot of odd characters around...

The voices came nearer, and the doctor recognised the tones of the man who had bumped into him earlier; the gate creaked, and slow footsteps rang on the path.

His visitor gave a gasp of sheer terror. "Bones, please! Let me in!"

No-one's called me 'Bones' in twenty years! was McCoy's first thought. He pressed his hand on the plate. "Get inside, and keep quiet!"

A shadow slipped inside the door, and with a calm he was very far from feeling, McCoy turned to greet the newcomer.

"Can I help you?" He winced as a flashlight fell on his face, blinding him.

"Oh, it's you again, Doc. Sorry to bother you. We're looking for a deserter; one of my men thought he'd seen him come this way. You haven't seen him, have you?"

"Sorry, no - I've only just arrived," McCoy said. "You may search the garden, if you wish."

"Thanks." The man tramped off, and for a few minutes the garden was full of voices and flashing lights as the search progressed. At last the men drifted away, and the engineer returned.

"No luck?" McCoy asked.

"No - I guess he got away. Sorry to disturb you, Doc. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

McCoy waited until the man closed the gate before he entered the house, closing the door firmly behind him. The room was in darkness, and a touch on the light switch revealed his visitor sprawled unconscious just inside the doorway.

Concerned, McCoy knelt and turned the limp body over - then stared down in sheer disbelief as time spun back twenty, thirty years, and he gazed into the face of Jim Kirk.

"Impossible!" he muttered. Jim Kirk was twenty years dead, and anyway, his visitor was far too young... But could it be...could it possibly be...that unknown to him his dead friend had fathered a son? Marlena Moreau... Anne Mulhall... Areel Shaw... There had been so many women...

And yet...Jim Kirk's son in the drab coveralls of an engineering technician?

Setting the mystery aside for the moment McCoy touched his fingers to the sluggishly bleeding cut on the young man's face. First things first, he decided, and lifted the man onto the couch before going to fetch his medical kit.

The injury tended, he sought for further damage, but the stranger seemed only to be suffering from extreme exhaustion; as McCoy pulled off the coveralls, though, the mystery deepened - his visitor wore the uniform of a Commander in Starfleet, his insignia the gold arrowhead of the Science Department of the U.S.S. Enterprise.

"Impossible!" McCoy repeated. Thelev of Andor was Science Officer of the Enterprise now, under Sulu's command; and McCoy was convinced that he would have heard of any officer in the Fleet who was Jim Kirk's double.

There were a thousand questions he wanted to ask, but when those disturbingly familiar eyes opened at last, McCoy's first thought was for his patient.

"How do you feel?"

The young man accepted McCoy's help to sit up, and drained the glass that was handed to him. "I'm fine now. That engineer got in a lucky punch - he almost caught me."

"Then do you feel up to telling me who you are, and what you're doing here?"

Firm lips curved in the well-remembered grin. "Don't you know me, Bones?"

McCoy looked at him, his eyes shadowed. "I know who you seem to be. But I'm too old and tired for guessing games...and it hurts too much. Are you...his son?"

"I'm sorry." The teasing light died in the hazel eyes. "It's just...meeting you at last... Spock's told me so much about you..."

"Spock? You've seen him? He's alive?" Feeling suddenly faint McCoy sat down heavily. He was aware that his erstwhile patient had jumped from the couch, that a strong arm encircled his shaking shoulders.

"I'm doing this so badly," the quiet voice murmured.

"Spock... To have news after so long... Is he well? Tell me," McCoy pleaded. "Did he seek you out, is that it? He found Jim Kirk's son, and..."

"No, I am not Captain Kirk's son. I'll tell you all that I can." The stranger sat back on his heels, one hand resting lightly on McCoy's arm. "Have you ever heard of the theory of alternate universes?"

"Vaguely." McCoy frowned in concentration. "I remember listening to Spock and Scotty discussing it once, but most of it went over my head. As I remember, it's an argument that parallel universes exist alongside ours, possibly similar, possibly very different."

"It is more than a theory, for I am the James Kirk from one of those alternate universes. There is much that I cannot tell you, but... After your friend died, Spock learned that these alternate universes do exist, and realised that in some other reality Jim Kirk still lived, and might have need of him. He was able to...to study the alternate time-lines, and eventually learned to pass between them. He...he found me in great peril, and came to my aid...then for many reasons he could not leave me. He remained in my universe."

"Did a Spock not already exist there?" McCoy asked.

"He had done...but he died." For a moment the hazel eyes fell. "One of the differences was, he'd been Captain, I was First Officer. Spock assumed his place."

"It must have been a comfort to you both, to have found each other. Your Spock's death must have grieved you."

Colour flooded the pale cheeks. "Forgive me, but I cannot bear to speak of it, even now," Kirk said quietly. "His death left the ship in grave danger, and I was in no fit state to take command... Spock saved my life and my sanity. He made his home in my universe, and we were content, until...until it became necessary for him to return here."

"What brought him back?"

"You did."

"I?"

"Well, your...counterpart in my universe - 'my' Dr. McCoy. He's dying, and Spock came to ask your help."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Xenopolycythemia."

"I remember. It was a long time ago."

"Yonada no longer exists in my universe - another difference. Spock thought to come back, get the formula for the treatment from you. But then..."

McCoy sat up quickly, noting Kirk's increased pallor. "That's enough for now - you can tell me the rest later. You're exhausted," he said firmly.

"I'm all right," Kirk insisted, his eyes following McCoy as the doctor stood up and reached for his medical kit. "It's only the after-effects of the transfer. What matters is that something went wrong - Spock didn't come back."

"So you came after him, huh?"

"Yes, I..." Kirk's eyes widened as McCoy pressed a hypo to his shoulder.

"No! You don't understand! I must..." His voice faded as he slumped unconscious.

"A few hours won't make that much difference," McCoy grunted as he lifted the limp body and carried Kirk into the spare bedroom. "You'll be more use to Spock - wherever he is - once you're rested."

Gently he drew the cover over the sleeping figure, then stood looking down at the well-remembered face. It was an almost incredible story, yet somehow McCoy knew that it was true - knew it with a certainty that went beyond reason, beyond probability, as he responded in the old way to the presence of Jim Kirk.

An alternate universe... Jim alive and well, Spock once more at his side... Wait, though! What had Jim said? Spock had returned here, was missing...

The Vulcan would have tried to reach him - that at least was certain. McCoy went into the small office he used at home and checked the recorded calls made to his number during his absence. There was nothing he could not account for, no name he did not recognise, no message that could have been an attempted contact by the Vulcan.

Thinking hard, McCoy moved into the kitchen and automatically prepared a

light supper. Perhaps when Jim woke he would have some idea where to start looking - he would have known Spock's plans.

If only there was someone he could trust, someone he could ask for help! But the disappearance of Commodore Spock had mystified Starfleet - here on Vulcan even the most indirect enquiry about him would quickly reach the ears of a higher authority... McCoy quailed at the possible complications of Starfleet Command learning of the alternate universes. No, he and Jim must tackle it alone - but how?

The door signal chimed, and making sure the bedroom door was firmly shut, McCoy went to answer it; he half expected to see the men who had been pursuing Kirk, but instead the door slid aside to reveal a totally unexpected figure - and the answer to his wish of a few moments ago.

"Scotty!" McCoy grabbed the engineer's arm and pulled him inside. "Scotty, am I ever glad to see you!"

"Ah thocht tae surprise ye, Leonard." The engineer returned McCoy's hug of welcome. "Ah'm addressing a conference here on Vulcan in a few days, but Ah cam' on early tae hae some time wi' an auld friend. Man, it's been a long time! But ye're lookin' well, Leonard."

"You too, Scotty. Oh, this is marvellous - you couldn't have come at a better time. There's something - someone - I want you to see...you won't believe it...I hardly can myself, but... Oh, come and see for yourself!"

Half laughing, half crying, McCoy led the bewildered engineer into the bedroom, turned the lamp on at its lowest setting, and pointed to the bed, watching his friend's face as his eyes slowly made out the sleeping figure.

Bewilderment, hope, confusion, recognition, flitted across Scotty's face in rapid succession. "Jim Kirk? Och, it canna be!" Stunned, he sat down quickly on the bed.

The sudden weight disturbed Kirk, who stirred restlessly. McCoy moved closer, anticipating the moment when he awoke, savouring Scotty's startled delight.

"Spock." Half asleep, Kirk reached out and touched the engineer's shoulder. He murmured a few words in Vulcan, then opened his eyes, blinking sleepily as he focused on the face leaning over him.

To McCoy's utter astonishment, horror and despair clouded the hazel eyes, and Kirk shrank back as far as he could.

"Scotty...I'm sorry...I didn't mean...forgive me..." The disjointed words were scarcely audible as Kirk turned away, burying his face in the pillow. "I can face my other ghosts now...but not yours, Scotty...never yours. You were kind to me once...don't punish me now...please..."

Suddenly McCoy realised what was wrong. "Jim, wake up!" He caught Kirk's shoulder, alarmed at the violent trembling of the body under his hands, and pulled Kirk round to face him. "Don't you remember where you are? This isn't your universe - it's the one Spock came from." And what was your relationship with Scotty there, when you're so afraid of him here? his unspoken thought continued.

"What...?" Scotty began, but McCoy waved him to silence.

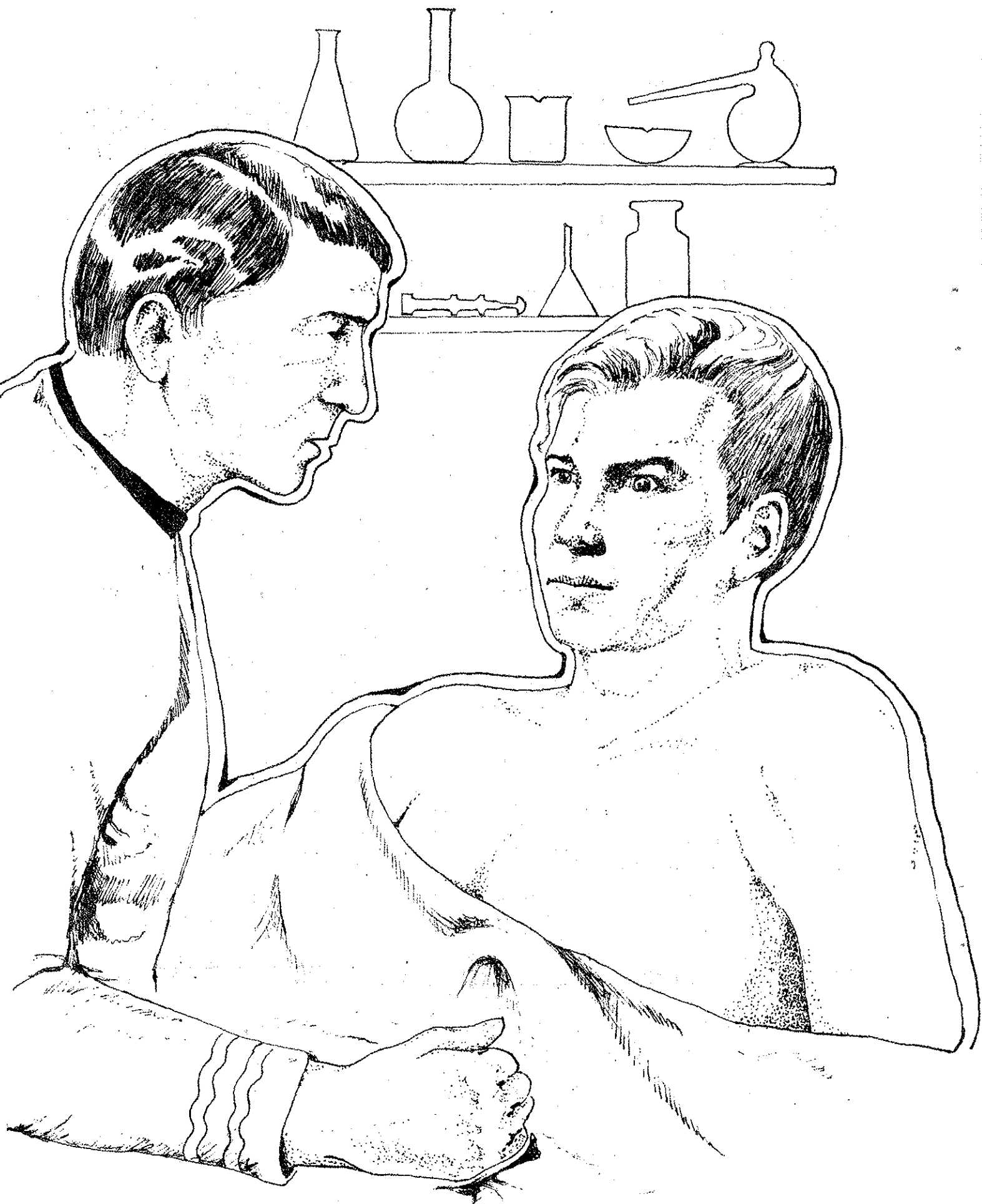
"Jim, there's nothing to fear. Remember what happened."

Slowly the trembling stopped, and Kirk raised his head, the shadows clearing from his eyes as he came fully awake.

"I was dreaming, and forgot. I thought..." He looked at Scotty, and the engineer frowned in concern at the mixture of shame and joy in the eyes that shyly met his.

"The other...alive here," Kirk whispered almost to himself.

"Leonard, whit's goin' on?" Scotty demanded. "Who's this?"



Quickly McCoy repeated the story as he knew it, and the engineer shook his head in confusion.

"Alternate universe? Aye, I ken the theory. Spock alive, ye say? And this is an alternate of Captain Kirk? Weel, I've seen odd enough things in my time no' tae believe ye, laddie. But Captain...Jim... Whit the devil dae I call ye?"

"Call my 'Jim', please," Kirk said quietly. "I'm First Officer of the Enterprise in my universe, and not your Captain - though I know enough of him to respect him as you do."

"Jim, then." Scotty hesitated. "Why dae ye look at me as though ye'd seen a ghost? I'd like fine tae help ye, but how can I dae that if ye dinna trust me?"

"It's not that." Kirk coloured painfully. "In my universe, you - your counterpart - he's dead, and it was my fault. Knowing that, can you trust me?"

Scotty looked deep into the troubled eyes. "I can," he said firmly. "Spock trusts ye, and that's good enough for me. Forbye that, James Kirk was my friend - and still is."

"Thank you, Scotty." Kirk smiled for a moment, and both men caught their breath as the old magic wove its spell again, ensnaring them both as willing captives in the web of Kirk's charm.

"Thank you both, my friends," Kirk continued. "There's not much more to tell. Spock reached Vulcan - I know that from the readings on the equipment - but he didn't contact you, Bones. Something happened to him, and I must find out what."

"Do you know where he intended to arrive on Vulcan?" McCoy asked.

"When Spock commanded the Starbase he had a hidden workroom in the cellar of his house there. It was the one place he had precise co-ordinates for, and where he could be sure of materialising unseen. But he got beyond the cellar - I came that way, and there was no sign of him."

"Could he have had some sort of accident leaving the base?" Scotty asked.

"Spock knew the base better than any man alive. Besides, an injured man would have been found by Security and brought to sickbay, whatever was done with him after that," McCoy pointed out. "Even if it happened when I wasn't there, I see all reports as a matter of course, and there was nothing like that."

"Not an accident, then, and he wouldn't worry Jim by unnecessary delay," Scotty mused. "He'd have contacted McCoy if he'd been able to - so that means he was prevented."

"Prevented?" Kirk looked first puzzled, then alarmed. "Oh my god - the press gangs!"

"No, not that." Scotty shook his head positively. "Not even the most desperate Captain would risk shipping a shanghaied Vulcan. I was thinking more of the base itself. Jim, there are many people on Vulcan who would recognise Commodore Spock. Suppose..." He seemed reluctant to finish the thought. "Suppose he was recognised and captured? Isn't it possible that he's being held secretly while Starfleet investigates his...his disappearance? They'd call it desertion."

"They'd want to know where he's been all this time, and why he came back." Kirk pursued the thought. "They'd question him... Yes, it's possible. How do we find him?"

"Bluff," McCoy offered. "I'll go and see Sendak in the morning."

"Sendak?" Kirk broke in.

"Spock's cousin. He commands Starbase Vulcan now."

"In the other universe he's no friend of ours," Kirk said worriedly, remembering how the man had attempted to frighten him on the day of his bonding.

"He's no' an easy man," Scotty comforted, "but he's fair and honourable."

He'll no' harm Spock, or allow him to be harmed."

"That's true," McCoy agreed. "I'll go and see him, tell him I've heard a rumour that Commodore Spock has been seen on Vulcan. If he denies it we'll have to think again, but I'm sure he won't tell me a direct lie. If Spock is here, I'll get in to see him."

"Is there any way I could come with you?"

"It's an additional risk," McCoy frowned.

"Not for me - remember, I'm twenty years dead on this Vulcan. Besides, I think it important that I come - whatever Sendak tells you, if Spock is on the base, I'll know."

"How can you?" Scotty looked puzzled.

"In my universe, Vulcans are telepathic. Apparently they have the potential here too, but it's a latent ability. Spock...learned to develop his powers, and we are...aware...of each other; that's why I'm so sure he's alive."

"Oh, I see - I think. Hmmm, it won't be easy to get you onto the base... Hey, that Security alert! So that's why Sendak ordered it! I have an idea, though... Tell you what, Jim. Get some rest, there's nothing we can do tonight anyway. In the morning I'll make a few calls, and if things work out all right, I should be able to get you into the base."

"Okay, Bones - I am tired." McCoy smiled faintly at Kirk's unconscious use of the old nickname - it was going to be pleasant to hear it again, even for a brief time. "Goodnight, Scotty - I'll see you in the morning."

McCoy covered his guest with a blanket again, dimmed the light, then beckoned Scotty to follow him from the room. "I'd say we deserve a drink, Scotty."

"Aye!" The engineer gazed back at the closed door. "Who's hae thoct it? Jim Kirk...and Spock... Thanks, Leonard." He took the glass, drained it, and held it out for a refill. "Did ye see how he looked at me? Leonard, something terrible's happened tae the lad - it fair braks ma hert tae see that expression in his eyes, and ken I'm the cause o' it."

"Not you - your counterpart. Talk to him, Scotty. I got the impression..."

"Aye?"

"I got the impression he needs...I don't know...your forgiveness, perhaps. You saw how he was - nervous, ashamed and overjoyed all at once. It's going to be hard to remember he's not Captain Kirk, Scotty - but he is Jim Kirk, and any help I can give him, I will. But he needs something from you, too. Will you give it?"

"If I can," Scotty promised.

In McCoy's small guest room Jim Kirk tossed restlessly, too worried to sleep despite his aching tiredness. The effects of the 'transporter' seemed to have hit him harder than they had done Spock - though this was his first time, and the Vulcan had used the mechanism several times before. Could that have affected him somehow? A cumulative effect, distorting his judgement and reflexes, rendering him vulnerable? It was possible.

At last, abandoning the futile attempt to sleep, Kirk sat up in bed, hugging his knees, his eyes fixed on the brilliant stars so familiar to him now, identical to the ones that shone over his adopted world. He longed desperately to be back there in the only home he had known since his early childhood, to be safe in his room with Spock asleep just through the wall; and in the morning there would be Sarek's grave welcome, T'Pol's affectionate greeting...

But no. This was Spock's true home, he remembered. For a moment his old doubt and uncertainty filled him. Could it be - could it possibly be - that Spock, finding himself once more in his own world, had regretted the impulse that

had sent him into exile, bound him to Kirk? Had he simply decided to stay here, to return to the family, the friends, the life that had been his? Had he finally tired of Kirk's dependence on him?

No gain, Kirk told himself firmly. The love he had felt through their half-formed bond was so great, so enduring, that the Vulcan would not even consider the idea of parting. More, there was McCoy, the innocent cause of his journey. McCoy, so desperately ill, his very life depending on the success of the quest. Whatever else, Spock would not permit their loyal friend to die without making every effort to save him.

Something was holding Spock here against his will, Kirk was certain. He dismissed out-of-hand the thought that the Vulcan might be dead, for incomplete though it was, he would have felt the severance of their bond. True, he would live if Spock died, for only the fully-consummated bonding established a link deep enough to draw both partners into a shared death, but the part of his mind that was Spock's living presence still radiated its gentle warmth.

With a sudden need to touch his bondmate's mind Kirk reached out, calling, praying for an answer. He had reached Spock before over an immense distance... but he had been on the point of death then. For a moment he lay still, his mind open, receptive to catch the faintest echo of Spock's thoughts...but there was nothing.

He could be hurt - or ill! Kirk's heart jolted in fear. Perhaps they were wrong, perhaps Spock had been injured by the transfer process. Or the Security guards at the base might have harmed him... Yet if they had McCoy would have heard about it...

Vulcans are civilised! Kirk told himself sternly. They wouldn't - couldn't - leave an injured man without treatment.

//What do you know of this Vulcan?// Fear mocked him in the depths of his mind. //Sendak commands here - and he took pleasure in tormenting you, did he not?//

"He's different here - Scotty and McCoy both trust him." Kirk was unaware of having spoken aloud.

//Then perhaps he wasn't captured,// Fear suggested slyly. //He could be hiding somewhere, unable to seek help. McCoy said there was a Security alert at the base.//

"I had no trouble getting out."

//You are clearly a Human - they'd be looking for a Vulcan. He could be trapped on the base, hurt, in pain, unable to reach McCoy, unable to return to the cellar. He could be dying...//

//SPOCK!" Kirk gathered all his fear, all his determination, all his love, and projected his thoughts as intensely as he could. //If you can feel me - I'm coming. I'll find you - believe me, I'll find you somehow!""

There was no response to his cry, no way to tell if he had been heard or not. There was nothing more that he could do. As the sedative McCoy had given him earlier finally took effect again, Kirk slid down in the bed and closed his eyes wearily.

The following morning Scotty was halfway through an early breakfast when the spare room door opened and Kirk appeared. He smiled nervously at the engineer.

"Good morning. Where's Bones?"

"He went out early - he said to be sure you ate breakfast. Here, sit down."

"Thanks." Kirk slid into a chair and took the coffee Scotty handed him; as he sipped it his eyes kept returning to the other man's face, then flickering quickly away.

"Want to talk about it, Jim?"

"Huh?"

"Whatever it is about me that bothers you. Seems to me, Jim, it'd be easier on us both if we got it out into the open."

"You're right, of course - and you do have a right to know as much as I can tell you." Kirk stared down at his clasped hands. Without raising his eyes he continued painfully. "My life was...very different...from that of the Captain Kirk you knew. I grew up alone, with no family, no-one who cared whether I lived or died. I'm telling you that not as an excuse, not to gain your sympathy, but to help you understand why I was so desperate for kindness, affection - and why, when I thought I'd found it, I acted like a fool. Oh, I was clever enough academically - I won a scholarship to Starfleet Academy, graduated first in my class ...I was even proud, when I was accepted for Command training, that I'd done it all by myself. The Enterprise was my first training ship under Captain Pike, then I served on the Farragut for a time, with spells on the Defiant and the Excalibur. Then I was transferred back to the Enterprise as Science Officer and eventually First Officer - I liked working for Captain Pike again, but we had little in common... They'd been good years for me...but I was so lonely..."

His voice faded, and Scotty watched the intent, brooding face, then dropped his gaze to Kirk's hands, noting idly that the younger man was turning a heavy gold ring on the fourth finger of his left hand - a nervous habit, the Scotsman assumed.

"I...met someone," Kirk resumed at last. "At first he seemed everything I'd ever wanted in a friend - he made me feel...special, cared for...I trusted him..."

Gary Mitchell? Finnegan? Scotty wondered. No, not Finnegan, surely. It must have been Mitchell - history repeating itself?

"It was all a sick pretence, a trick to gain my confidence," Kirk went on. "He didn't want a friend - he wanted a...an obedient, docile, unquestioning follower. It took me a while to realise that, and when I did it was too late - he had a hold over me I didn't have the strength to break."

"Surely Spock would have helped you?"

"I...didn't know Spock then." It was no lie, Kirk told himself; he never thought of the Captain as 'Spock'. "I did many things I'm ashamed of," he continued slowly, "and the difficult thing now is that I can't fully explain why, or the nature of the power he had over me - it's one of the differences between our universes that he was able to do it, but he held my will captive, controlled me..."

"It's all right - I understand." Scotty thought fleetingly of the insane, no-longer-Human destroyer Mitchell had become. "Just tell me what happened."

"It got worse...but for the most part I was the only one he harmed. Then... I swear to you, Scotty, I didn't know what he planned! Your counterpart got too close to the truth, and had to be...eliminated. Because he trusted me, I was the bait in the trap - I led him to his death... I watched, and could do nothing ...I loathed myself then, and what I'd become...and oh god, there was no escape for me! Then...soon after...Spock came, and freed me...I learned how to live again, to be happy...but you were dead...and it was my fault... Even Spock couldn't erase my guilt..."

"And then your Spock died?" Scotty prompted as Kirk fell silent, absorbed in his memories.

"Hmmm? Oh, yes... Then the other - the Commodore - entered my universe. The Captain was dead, the ship was in danger, and I was...unable to cope. He took command, saved us all. Afterwards... It was going to be difficult to explain what had happened, and only McCoy knew of the Captain's death. Spock needed...me, as much as I needed him, he wanted to stay, and I wanted... It seemed easier just to carry on as we were. We became very close... He showed me how to live with my guilt at last." Very near the truth, Kirk added mentally,

then continued aloud, "The one thing I'd give my life to change is what happened to your counterpart - there might have been some way I could have saved him if I hadn't been such a weak, trusting coward."

"You suffered too, I think." Scotty's voice was very gentle as he reached out to touch the restless hands. "Laddie, whit's done is done, and all your tears canna' change it. You didna' wish for my death, and you've paid too long for another's crime. Will ye no' tak' an auld man's advice, Jim and let it be? There's much ye've no' told me, I ken that fine, and it's your own pain and sorrow you're hiding. Look tae the future, laddie, and be happy, with my blessing."

"Thank you, Scotty." Kirk returned the handclasp. "I needed to hear that, more than you know. I've often thought...he would have forgiven me if he knew what really happened...but you can't explain to a dead man."

"Aye." Scotty tightened his grip for a moment. "Let's close that chapter, shall we? It's your Vulcan we've got to think of now."

"I know." Kirk rose and began to pace restlessly. "I wish McCoy would get back."

"And your wish is my command." McCoy hurried into the room, carrying a light travelling bag. "You look better, Jim. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thanks. You and my McCoy have the same skill with a hypo. Any news?"

"Yes and no." McCoy sat down at the table. "Give me some coffee, Scotty. Thanks. I haven't been to the base yet, but I have found a way to get you inside." He gestured with his cup. "Open the case."

Kirk obeyed, and found a tunic and trousers of fine blue material, a pair of knee-high boots, and a length of cloth that matched the suit, but had no purpose that he could recognise.

"Just what we needed," grinned McCoy. "I thought of Vanek last night, but I had to make sure he'd agree first. One of my students," he explained, "from the hill tribes of Marabec. He'll be a fine doctor one of these days. Here, let me show you." Rising, McCoy took the length of cloth from Kirk and settled it over his head, binding it in place with a blue and white cord. "The loose end is caught up over the face - like this. It's standard dress for a Hillman - the headcloth has a religious significance, like the turbans of the Sikhs. The point is, the guards at the base, even Sendak himself, are so used to seeing Vanek accompany me that no-one will suspect you're not him."

"But won't he ask questions?"

"No. There's a complex relationship of trust between a physician and his students on Marabec. I gave Vanek my word that I needed his help for an honourable purpose, to help a friend, and he accepted my assurance. The responsibilities of friendship are highly recognised in his culture. He'll stay out of sight until he's needed, and when he is he'll tell exactly the story we want him to tell. Don't worry, Jim - he knows how to get round any truth drug or lie detector test Starfleet cares to try...so do I, for that matter. We'll have a story ready that no-one can disprove. Now go and get changed - we have an appointment with Sendak in just over an hour."

Comodore Sendak schooled his face to its most expressionless mask as Dr. McCoy bustled into his office. He had a great respect for the surgeon, and though it could not be doubted that the man was too inclined to be ruled by his emotions to suit the Vulcan taste, he was no fool - and Sendak had a secret he wished to guard from this man above all others.

He looked up enquiringly as McCoy planted himself in front of his desk, his blue eyes cold and intent, and the Human's first words destroyed any hope of secrecy.

"What have you done with Spock?" McCoy barked.

"Doctor, I scarcely think..." Sendak glanced meaningfully at McCoy's assistant, who stood just inside the door, watching silently.

"You don't have to worry about Vanek - he knows how to keep a still tongue in his head. Just answer my question."

"As you know, Commodore Spock disappeared..."

"Sendak, let's not play logic games." McCoy rested his hands on the desk and leaned closer. "People talk, you know, even on Vulcan. I know why you ordered that Security alert. Now, are we going to double-talk around the subject for the next hour? Where is Spock?"

"Under close detention in the Security section," Sendak admitted quietly. "No-one, save the guard who arrested him, the Security Chief and myself, know his identity."

"Why such secrecy?"

"Doctor! Commodore Spock is - was - a respected figure on Vulcan, and in Starfleet. Three years ago he deserted his command, vanished without trace - now he is picked up in the heart of the very Starbase he deserted. He refuses to give any explanation for his absence, any account of where he has been, or the reason for his return. Starfleet Command has been notified, and by their order the Commodore is being held in close confinement until an investigation has been completed and charges decided."

"Charges? What charges?"

"Desertion, certainly. Possibly treason - he may well have been in the Romulan Empire. He was once offered a position of importance there - he might have decided to accept it."

"Spock a traitor? Don't be a bigger fool than you can help, man!"

"The possibility exists, and cannot be ignored. If his long absence was involuntary, the logical thing to do would be to offer an explanation and give all possible information on his abduction. This he refuses to do."

"That doesn't sound like Spock. I suppose you're quite sure it is him?"

"Indeed. Full identity checks have been run."

"I want to see him."

"That cannot be permitted."

"It'd better be! I'm talking as Doctor McCoy, Sendak. By your own admission, no-one knows where Spock has been all these years. Any Starfleet officer who has been exposed to unknown hazards must be medically examined - you know that as well as I do. Besides, I'll have to see him eventually - Starfleet will need an evaluation of his mental condition."

The Vulcan nodded, conceding defeat. "This is top security," he warned.

McCoy grunted. "I've had top security clearance for over thirty years - and my senior students automatically have it too."

"Come, then. You will need my personal authorisation to gain admittance."

The two Security guards saluted smartly as Sendak halted outside a locked cell.

"Admit Dr. McCoy and his assistant," he ordered. "Inform me when he leaves."

"Yes, Commodore." The guards unlocked the cell - McCoy noted that the lock required two keys, one held by each - and swung open the heavy door. For a moment he wondered why this ancient method of confinement was being used rather than the force-field cells, then realised that with a force-field anyone passing the cell could see - and perhaps recognise - the prisoner. The use of the ancient cell was a blessing in this case, though, for it would give privacy for the interview with Spock.

The door thudded into place behind them, and Kirk's controlled stillness shattered; with a low cry of "Spock!" he sprang forward to the man who had risen from a low couch at their entrance.

Remembering how Spock had always disliked open displays of emotion, McCoy was startled when the impetuous figure was received with open arms. The two men hugged fiercely for a moment, then Kirk pulled back, searching the other's face anxiously.

"Are you all right?"

Spock raised one hand to Kirk's shoulder, and with the other unwound the disguising headcloth. "I am well," he said quietly. "But Jim - you should not have followed me. The danger..."

"The only danger I thought of was that I'd never see you again," Kirk said softly. "I was sure you were alive... I tried to reach you last night..."

"I believe I sensed your nearness, Jim. I could not touch your mind, but somehow I was no longer alone... I had confidence, a belief that all would be well... But how did you gain access to the Starbase?"

"I had help." Kirk nodded over the Vulcan's shoulder, and Spock swung round, realising for the first time that Kirk was not alone.

"Dr. McCoy!"

The surgeon found himself grinning, overwhelmed by the surprised pleasure in the Vulcan's tone. He could not quite bring himself to hug Spock as Kirk had done, but he gripped his arms tightly.

"Spock, it's been so long. It's good to see you."

A slanting eyebrow rose. "No questions, McCoy? No doubts, no worries about my loyalty?"

"Yours? I'd as soon doubt my own." McCoy's voice was rough with unshed tears as he glanced aside for a moment at the Human's glowing face. "Besides, I always knew where your first loyalty lay... Jim has told me as much as he can... I understand, Spock."

"Thank you, my friend. You know, then, about your counterpart?"

"Yes. I've written out the formula for the drug, and my notes on treatment. It's easy enough to make up once you know what's in it. You...can't stay, of course?" His tone was wistful.

"I cannot. My life is there now - with Jim."

"I envy you that." McCoy looked longingly at the young face, the eyes shining as only Kirk's could at his reunion with his friend. Confidence radiated from him - now McCoy saw indeed the young Captain Kirk he remembered so vividly.

Unconsciously, he sighed. "No, it wouldn't be the same, would it? You're lucky - you have it all to do again. Me - well, I'm too old now, I can't go back... and there's no place for you any more in this world...or for Jim. It's just... I miss you both..."

"I know." Spock's voice was very gentle.

"Don't mind me - just feeling my age, I guess. At least you're both alive, and together... Now, what we need is a way to get you out of here."

"You know this base better than I do, and it might have changed since Spock was here," Kirk said. "Any ideas, Bones?"

"Getting you out of the Security section is hopeless. If you were in sickbay something could be arranged."

"That might be possible," Spock said thoughtfully. "If I appeared to be in a coma, I would have to be removed to sickbay."

"No use." McCoy shook his head. "I wasn't allowed to bring any drugs with me."

"None are necessary. I have learned certain techniques unknown on this world. It is possible for me to put myself into a trance so deep that all my life signs will appear very low - the only requirement is that Jim must be on hand to recall me."

"Since he's posing as my assistant there'll be no trouble there - he'll have free access to sickbay. Anything else?"

"Sendak has the control mechanism for the 'transporter'. We must have it to return home."

"We can worry about that later," McCoy said. "First, let's get you out of here."

"When do you wish me to begin?"

"It'd be better to wait a little - then your collapse won't be too obviously linked with my visit."

"During my interrogation I was given several drugs to encourage me to speak. They were harmless, Jim," Spock added hastily as Kirk looked at him with anxiety. "I was able to resist them easily, but if I had an allergic reaction..."

"Well thought of, Spock." McCoy grinned. "I'll tell the guards I'm worried, and ask them to check on you every thirty minutes. If you could seem normal on the first check, then increasingly ill, until they find you unconscious, say two hours from now. It'll seem more natural that way."

"Very well - in two hours. Jim, you must leave now."

"Yes... Take care, Spock." Kirk and Spock touched hands briefly in a seemingly ritual gesture McCoy found teasingly familiar, though he could not place it; then Kirk replaced his headcloth and moved to McCoy's side.

"Guards! I've finished here - you can let me out." Over his shoulder McCoy added softly, "Good luck, Spock."

Just over two hours later a wheeled stretcher was brought into sickbay, escorted by the two guards, and with Sendak himself in attendance. McCoy's eyes widened as he took readings - if he had not been warned, he would have thought that Spock was dying.

"Total life support, Vanek!" As his assistant guided the stretcher into the isolation ward McCoy planted himself squarely in front of the two guards as they made to follow. "And where the hell do you think you're going?" he demanded belligerently.

"We must take precautions," Sendak intervened. "If he should escape..."

"Escape? In his condition?" McCoy glared at the Vulcan. "I'm going to have your head for this, Sendak! Pumping god alone knows what drugs into a prisoner without proper medical supervision!"

"Only a mild truth serum. It could not have caused..."

"Thank you, Doctor Sendak! It didn't occur to you, I suppose, that he might have developed an allergy to your 'mild' serum? Couldn't wait to find out what he'd been up to, could you? Now, perhaps, you'll never know. Now get out of here, and let me get on with my job of saving this man's life. Leave your wretched guards in the corridor, if you must, but I won't have them getting in my way here."

"Very well - there is only this one entrance to sickbay." Sendak peered through the observation panel into the room where the Marabeccan physician was busy attaching life support to Spock's motionless body. "He certainly seems in no state to be dangerous... You will inform me of any change in his condition?"

"Of course. Now get out." McCoy watched with satisfaction as the guards left to take up their position in the corridor, then entered the isolation unit, locked the door behind him, and blanked out the observation panel.

"Is it safe?" Kirk asked, removing the connections he had just set.

"Yes -- you can bring him out of it now."

McCoy watched with curiosity as Kirk touched his fingers to the Vulcan's face, then frowned in intense concentration. After some moments he withdrew his hand, and before the astonished surgeon could prevent him, crashed his open hand against Spock's cheek.

"Jim!"

"I know what I'm doing."

Another blow landed -- and another -- and another. Kirk was drawing back his arm for the fifth time when Spock's hand rose from the bed and closed around his wrist.

"That will be sufficient," the Vulcan said tranquilly. "What are you doing, McCoy?"

"My job," the doctor grunted. "That serum might have affected you, you know..." He concentrated on his scanner. "These cockeyed readings of yours, Spock -- I'd forgotten how peculiar they are. Even with that, I don't like the look of them."

"I think it more likely to be the effects of the cross-universe transfer," Spock answered.

"Are you all right?" Kirk's voice was sharp with anxiety. "If you've been harmed..."

"I am only tired," Spock said reassuringly. "Sendak's questioning was thorough, and I needed to use considerable strength to combat the drug."

"If you're sure." Kirk extended his hand, and again they touched in that almost-familiar gesture.

"Spock," McCoy broke in almost apologetically. "About that mechanism of yours... Do you know where it is?"

"In Sendak's office."

"I was just thinking -- perhaps I could get it for you. I can come and go without suspicion."

"It was in his safe -- and I observed that he had not changed the combination. Do you remember it?"

"Yes -- I should have no problem."

"Wait -- there's something else. During one of the interrogation sessions, Sendak brought the control with him to question me about it. Someone had taken it apart -- presumably to try and deduce its purpose. I observed that two of the smaller components were missing."

"Can you replace them?"

"It would be very difficult. I must, therefore, request a further service from you. There is an unfinished mechanism in my cellar workroom -- if memory serves me, it contains the parts I need. Would you get it for me?"

"Of course. But how do I get to the cellar?"

The Vulcan described the access to the workroom, then added, "The combination on the door is the same as that to the safe. You should have no difficulty."

"I'll try my best," McCoy promised. "Now I'd better put in an appearance before anyone gets suspicious." He glanced at the time. "We'll soon have you out of here -- but I'll have to call Scotty first."

"What do I do?" Kirk asked.

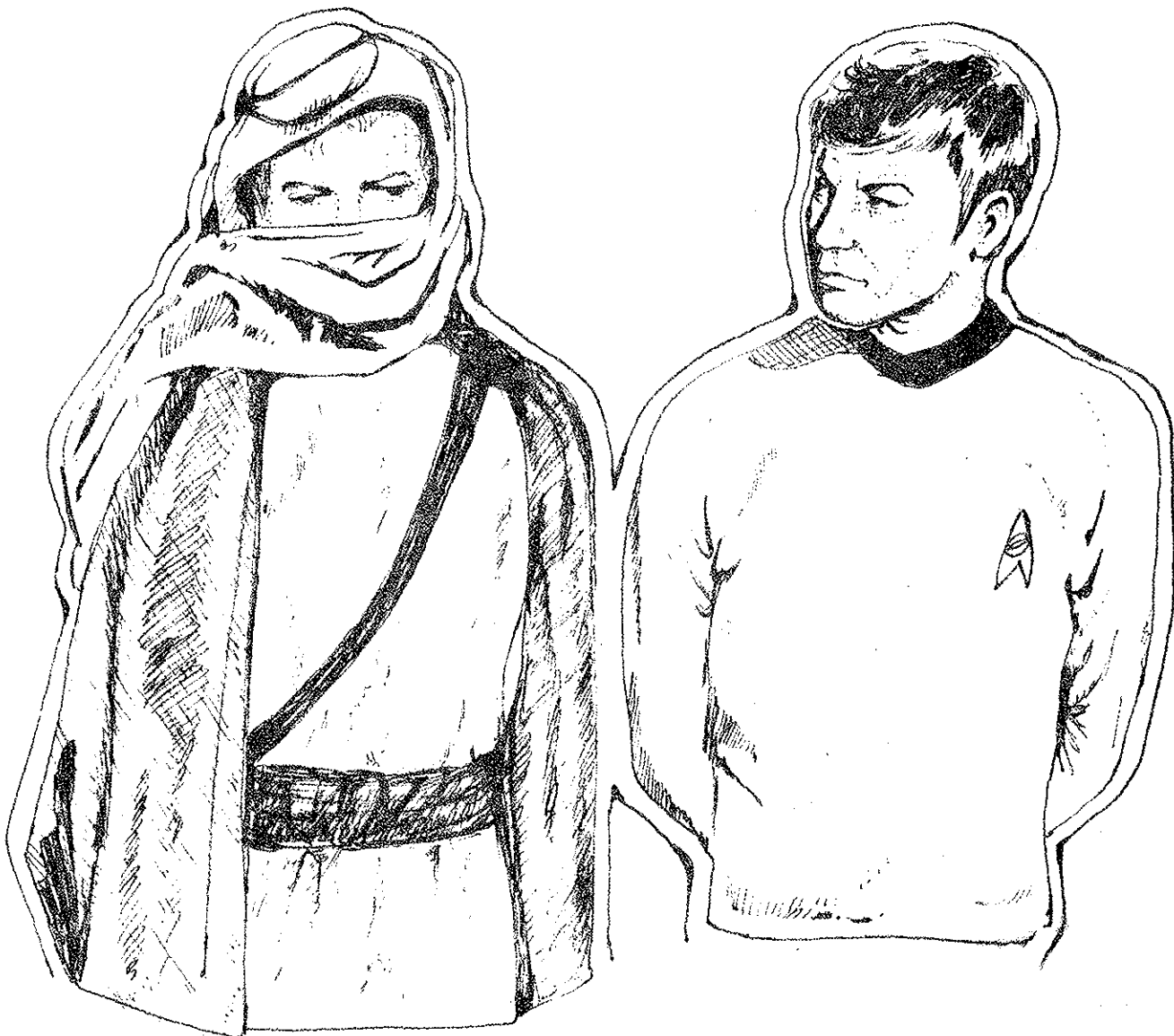
"Stay out of sight. In here's the best place -- after all, we do have a patient in intensive care."

"What if the guards come in to check on Spock's condition? I may look like Vanek, all muffled up like this, but my voice -- I haven't even heard it, to try to imitate it."

McCoy grunted. "Vanek doesn't talk much at the best of times -- very taciturn people, the Hillmen of Marabec. Your best plan would probably be to wave impatiently at the diagnostic panel...though goodness knows the readings all look normal enough now! But I'll give instructions that you mustn't be disturbed. Intensive care, critical condition...there are plenty of medical phrases to toss at the guards, and they'll be glad to stay away in case they get it all again from you!"

"Don't overdo it," Spock warned. "You have your reputation as a doctor to consider, and my miraculous recovery will strain that as it is."

McCoy shook his head. "Sendak saw the readings. He's a very frightened man right now, Spock, make no mistake. He knows he acted out with his authority over the truth serum -- a doctor should have been present before any drug,



no matter how mild, was given. That fright will make him think twice before he questions my diagnosis.... Add to that, your readings fooled me, a doctor, as completely as they fooled him. He'll agree with my report; he's too honest not to, and besides it makes him look less of a fool if the doctor was tricked too."

It was, in fact, less than an hour later that McCoy returned, followed by Scotty, who grinned broadly at the sight of the Vulcan.

"Commodore! It's grand tae see you!"

"Mr. Scott." Though quiet, Spock's voice was warm with pleasure, and Kirk drew aside a little, conceding without resentment that these old friends must claim Spock's attention now; but almost at once the Vulcan reached out, drawing Kirk to his side.

In three years he has grown so old! Spock thought with surprise, and observed for the first time that silver gleamed in McCoy's hair too. No, not three years, he corrected himself. More than twenty...but grief blinded me. Forgive me, my friends, for not seeing that you mourned him too.

"It's like nothing has changed." The engineer was looking at the two men with wonder. "Can ye no' see it, Leonard? Jim Kirk, with Spock at his side... as we knew them... Och, if we could only hae those days back again!"

"Please...do not..." Spock stepped forward and touched the engineer's shoulder.

"I know - it canna be. But leave an auld man his dream, laddie." Scott's face tightened in determination. "We're wastin' time."

"Yes, you've got to get out of here." McCoy shook his head, scattering the memories that had filled his eyes too. "Scotty will take you to a safe place where you can wait until I've had a chance to get to your mechanism."

"But if Spock escapes from here you'll be blamed," Kirk reminded them. "We can't let you be blamed..."

"No fear of that." McCoy chuckled as they moved out of the isolation ward into sickbay. "We have it all planned."

On one of the sickbay beds lay a figure dressed identically to Kirk, but bound and gagged. "Vanek came in with Scotty," McCoy explained. "Tie me up when you leave, then when he's taken you to safety Scotty will come back here openly and ask to see me. If the guards haven't been in here earlier to check on Spock, they'll find me then. It'll look as though Spock recovered unexpectedly, or else they'll think he was faking. Either way, Vanek will back my story."

"How can we leave without the guards seeing us?" Spock asked.

McCoy grinned. "You're as bad as Sendak - you've forgotten too." McCoy pressed a button which opened a sliding panel in the wall. "It's not much used, thankfully," he continued. "The passage leads from here to the mortuary, then on to emerge into a side street. We only use it to remove bodies - I've never liked trailing them all through the base - but for some reason Security never can seem to remember about it."

"Just as well," Scotty grunted. "Vanek and I cam' in that way, and saw never a soul. We'd best be moving, though, in case my aircar attracts attention. See you later, Leonard."

"You'd better tie me first," the doctor reminded them.

"Sorry."

Gently, but thoroughly, Scotty bound McCoy hand and foot, slipped a gag into place, then placed the doctor carefully on the bed. With a last glance the small party hurried through the panel into the dimly-lit tunnel beyond.

The street was deserted when they emerged and hurried into the aircar. Scotty took off at once, flying high enough for the occupants to be out of sight of anyone on the ground.

"Ye'd best mak' yoursel's comfortable," he said. "We've a way tae go, and I daurna' fly too fast in case we attract attention."

"Comfortable?" Kirk grimaced. A two-seater, the aircar was a tight fit for three, and to give Scotty room to manoeuvre Kirk and Spock had to huddle together in the passenger seat.

They flew in silence for some minutes before Kirk said, "Where are we going?"

"McCoy gave me directions - he said it was a place Spock often went. It seemed best tae tak' ye somewhere familiar." As he spoke Scotty glanced at his passengers, and saw that Spock had fallen asleep, encircled by Kirk's arm, his head resting on the Human's shoulder.

"He was very tired." Kirk spoke softly. "Apart from anything else, he had little sleep before he came away - it took him several days to build the 'transporter'."

"Aye. He must think a lot o' ye, Jim."

"He does. But what made you say it?"

"Seeing him like that. Before - he never liked to be touched. Oh, he'd let J...the Captain, sometimes, but I've never seen him so relaxed with anyone."

"He...knows how much I need him. Perhaps that's why - he always tried to make up to me for...for what happened."

"Jim..." Scotty swallowed. "Will ye...will ye tak' care o' him in that world of yours? He belongs with you now - a blind man could see that. But..."

"I understand, Scotty." Kirk smiled affectionately at the older man. "You - and McCoy - you love him too."

"Love? Aye - I suppose we do."

They landed some fifty miles from the Starbase. Spock woke as the aircar came to rest, and glanced round. "A good choice, Mr. Scott."

"McCoy's suggestion, as I told Jim. Here, gi' me a hand wi' these crates - we packed a few supplies in case it takes longer than we hope."

They unloaded a couple of boxes, carrying them to the shade of some bush-like plants. Straightening, Scott looked at Spock. "That should do for a day or two," he said.

Kirk looked around. It was very like a place where he and Spock had spent a week's leave some months ago.

It could only be called an oasis, although there was no sizable pool of water in sight. An area of perhaps a hundred square yards was quite heavily vegetated; a strip a further hundred yards or so in width surrounded this - a strip in which plants still grew, but more sparsely, their growth stunted by lack of sufficient water. One or two hardy succulents advanced beyond that again, fighting an apparently drawn battle with the relentless sun that sought to dehydrate everything that attempted to defy it.

The plants were all succulents, Kirk could see now, some of them barrel-shaped like many varieties of Terran cactus, others tree-like, with water-storing leaves projecting from tall stems. Some were species he recognised, both from seeing them at the other oasis and from having seen cultivated forms in T'Pau's garden, but many more were new to him, varieties that had not been growing at the other oasis.

There was no sign of man-made shelter, and as he already knew, they needed none; instead they simply set up a camp of sorts in the shade of a clump of succulents whose heavy, fleshy leaves drooped almost to the ground. Spock selected one that grew some distance from the small spring that would provide them with the water necessary for their survival. A moment's thought served to show Kirk why they did not camp among the succulents beside the spring; this was certainly the water supply for many desert animals whose routine would be disturbed by the presence of men. Besides, any search there might be would certainly be centered on the available water.

"I'll be leaving now," Scotty was saying. "Either McCoy or I will be over to let you know how things are going. Dinna be alarmed if you don't see us for a few days, though - we'd best let things settle down first."

The two men watched the aircar out of sight, then Kirk turned to his companion. "Come and eat," he suggested quietly. "Then get some rest - you must be exhausted."

"I am," Spock admitted, "and since we can do nothing until McCoy brings the mechanism, I confess it will be pleasant to relax here, in your company, Jim."

"I know...it's just...I keep thinking of our McCoy..."

"The delay will not be dangerous to him. We have several weeks yet before the effects of the disease become irreversable."

"You're right, of course. Come on, help me find the food."

The oasis was as beautiful as its counterpart, and for a day or so they rested, content simply to be reunited; but both were too well aware of the need to retrieve the return mechanism to relax fully. Unless McCoy could get to it without arousing suspicion they were trapped here - and while they could depend on McCoy - and Scotty - to help them, both men were growing older. What would happen when they died? And Bones, back in their own universe, condemned to a life, mercifully brief, of growing helplessness? It was not a thing either man could contemplate resignedly. And while it would be possible for Spock to rebuild his mechanism yet again, they had no free access to the components he would need; it might take months...and then they would return to the same charge of desertion that faced Spock here.

To help take his mind off a problem he was helpless to solve, Kirk prowled around the oasis, studying it as he had studied the other one. The similarities were too great, however; there seemed to be nothing new to catch his attention. But in the distance he could see something that looked...artificial? He drew Spock's attention to it.

The Vulcan smiled. "The ruins of the ancient city of Sas-a-Shar," he explained. "Once - millenia ago - it was a thriving community, the chief city of the land of Sharrasin. The land was fertile, rich agricultural land, and Sas-a-Shar and its people thrived. But then there came a period of drought, and the crops failed. Not just one year, or two; that, they could have survived. After the third year of drought, the smaller farmers were ruined. Irrigation projects that had been set in hand failed, for there was little water to spare for irrigation; even the wells in the city were drying up. The people began to leave.

A few stayed on for a year or two longer, but it was hopeless; the rain never fell again. Nobody knows what happened; but at that time, Vulcan's oceans also began to dry up. Perhaps the sun's radiation altered... We cannot say, for there are no records of such things. The situation is not unique; we know that other worlds have known long periods of drought where once rain forests flourished... But on Vulcan the entire planet suffers."

"Yes," Kirk said. "Great seas that dried up... There was one in the middle of the American continent once...and the Sahara Desert..."

Spock nodded. "Perhaps one day the rain will fall again and Vulcan's deserts flower once more. And yet...it has been so long. Sas-a-Shar flourished in the days of pre-recorded history; what we know of it we know from legend."

"How long is Vulcan's recorded history?" Kirk asked, curious.

"My family's records go back for...over two thousand Earth years. I know of only one other family whose records go back so far...but there are a few older ones where the direct line of descent died out and the records have been maintained by remote connections."

"In geological time, ten thousand years is nothing," Kirk pointed out softly. "And paleontological eras last for millions of years." He looked towards the ruins again. "Over two thousand years," he murmured. "On Earth, in much less time than that, the ruins would have been covered over by dust. What has caused these ruins to remain so...so complete, and so visible? Back home there isn't anything like that - but Sas-a-Shar and Sharrasin must have existed there too."

"I do not know," Spock replied. "I explored these ruins once...empty, but almost intact, the houses look as though their owners had simply gone away for a few days and would soon be back. There is even furniture in some of the houses."

"That sounds quite interesting," Kirk commented as he thought how sad it sounded, even reported in Spock's most matter-of-fact manner. "I'd quite like a look around the place."

Spock looked over the desert towards the ruins. "Jim, McCoy could come at any time, either with the mechanism or to let us know that the search for us has moved further away. What if he comes and we are not here?"

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that."

Kirk sounded so disappointed that Spock said slowly, "If you take care, you could go alone. I did, when I went..." But there was nobody to care whether I lived or died - or so I believed, he thought, aware now that two men at least would have cared. "You can't lose your way, for the ruins are clear; and this oasis is in full view from them - and the only one in view."

Kirk thought about it for a moment, aware of the dangers inherent in solitary desert travel even over a short distance. "I'd like to go," he said, almost apologetically. "If you don't mind."

"Why should I mind, Jim? It would be selfish for me to deny you the opportunity. Someone must remain behind, and I have already seen the ruins. They are unique - a piece of ancient Vulcan still in almost perfect repair - I doubt that any place comparable exists at home."

'At home'. Spock was not even conscious of saying it, Kirk realised. He smiled at his friend.

"I'll try not to be too long," he promised.

Spock's face relaxed into an almost-smile. "It will take you several hours to satisfy your curiosity," he warned. "Just...make sure there is enough daylight left before you leave the ruins to come back. If you think you've left it too late, don't risk heading back in the half light. Wait until morning."

"All right," Kirk agreed, aware that Spock would know through their bond-link if anything happened to him. He picked up one of the waterskins Scotty had left with them, checked that it was full, and set off.

The desert sand was firm, but yielding enough to make walking pleasant, and he moved briskly at first. As he neared the ruins, however, his pace slowed.

So big... He could think of nothing comparable, yet he knew he must have seen cities as big before...

Of course... People. Or rather, the lack of them.

He had never before seen a city devoid of people, of traffic, of movement -



and the movement detracted from the immensity of cities that sprawled, an enormous blight, across the land, reaching out greedy tentacles to grasp and engulf smaller towns nearby.

Kirk shivered despite the heat. Perhaps, after all, he should not have come. Much as the idea of a look at ancient Vulcan had appealed to him, he did not really like cities.

No. Cities themselves were harmless. He did not like the mentality of the compulsive city dweller. And this city was empty, its compulsive dwellers long gone. Even Vulcan had them, or Vulcan would not have cities... The Captain had been one. He had seen no beauty in...in T'Pol's garden, had never appeared to consider the possibility of staying anywhere, while on leave, except in a big hotel - of the Star Gardens type - in a city.

Resolutely, Kirk closed his mind to the unpleasant memories provoked by his train of thought. Their mental awareness of each other's consciousness would let Spock sense his unease, and Spock would be disturbed by it. He could not permit that.

The Human moved along the external wall formed by the backs of houses until he came to a gateway. It was not a city wall proper, he decided; for it lacked any indication of the fortifications he would have expected, knowing the warlike nature of the Vulcans of long ago, and that in itself seemed strange. He went through the doorway, and found himself in a long narrow street. Doorways, some of them still closed by wooden doors preserved - though sun-dried and warped to ill-fittingness - in the arid heat, fronted the street; windows gazed blindly across at the equally blind windows facing them. Whatever had once sealed those windows against the weather had long gone, perhaps too valuable to leave behind when the city was finally evacuated - had it been glass, or sheets of thin horn or mica such as Earth had once used? Traces of latticework still showed at the edges of some of the windows; the panes, whatever they had been made of, had been small.

He entered the first house - and his awareness of Spock immediately ceased.

In their camp, Spock tried to relax as he waited, wishing that he could have accompanied his friend. But, unexpected though a visit from McCoy was so soon, it was still a possibility that they could not ignore. The surgeon knew well enough the dangers of a departure from observed routine, but it was unlikely that he had come under any suspicion, and his routine was frequently variable. Nevertheless, as Spock's oldest living friend it was logical that a discreet watch would be kept on him in case the fugitive tried to contact him - McCoy had promised that he would make no move if there was even the slightest chance that he might betray Spock's hiding place.

Had it been a mistake to allow Kirk to go alone? Spock wondered. He was even more aware than Kirk of the dangers inherent in desert travel, for he was a native of this desert planet, and his upbringing had included survival techniques his adopted world did not know. He fought down the image of a sandstorm whipping down on the area just as Kirk was halfway back, catching the Human unaware, blinding him, choking him...

At least he was aware of Kirk, and that awareness would serve as a guide to lead him to his bondmate, his brother, should anything go wrong. And then...

The awareness ceased. Sudden, complete, it cut off to leave him trembling with shock and an overwhelming fear for Kirk's safety.

His mind reached out, calling, even as he began to move across the dry sand towards the ruins.

Then there came an answer. Kirk's mind, radiating reassurance. Spock caught at the link and held it.

//Jim - what happened?//

//I think I know. Just let me make sure...//

Again, and just as suddenly, the awareness ceased. Spock took a few hesitant steps, wanting to believe that Kirk knew what he was doing, but afraid of taking even the slightest chance with his bondmate's safety.

//I was right.// Kirk was back. //It's the buildings, Spock - as soon as I step inside our link is interrupted. Out of doors there's no problem.//

//It is possible that certain materials can inhibit the mind touch. If any such have been used in the construction of the city, any enclosed space would effectively wall you off from me.//

//Well, at least we know what it is,// Kirk remarked practically. //It gave me a fright when it happened, though.//

//There should be no problem, except that you might find a growing discomfort if we remain too long out of contact.//

//Why? We've never had this problem before.//

//Because until now only distance has ever separated us, a distance the link could not span. This artificial barrier interrupts the contact we should have, and the resistance causes the discomfort.//

//I'd like to know how it works, but I don't suppose I'll have time - and I certainly don't have the facilities - to investigate,// Kirk thought reluctantly, his curiosity aroused.

Spock glanced back at the oasis, then faced the ruins again, projecting a question. //Will I come?// He read the reluctant negative in his friend's mind, and turned back towards their camp. Before he reached it, Kirk's mind was shielded from him again.

Regretfully - the touch of the Human's mind, incomplete though the link was, filled an instinctive need in the Vulcan that he had not even known he had until it was satisfied - Spock settled down to think over the implications of that loss of contact. Jim had clearly experienced it as positively as he, Spock, had, but had realised at once what to do in order to re-establish their contact.

Spock thought back, remembering across the years. So many times he had come here, seeking in solitude the fortitude to accept his loss, and he had once thought that he had succeeded; and then he had discovered the existence of the other universes, of other, living, Kirks, and knew that he had not accepted his loss, merely become resigned to it. During that time of 'acceptance' he had visited the ruins, as he had told Kirk. He had been surprised at how little damage the years had done to the empty buildings...and now, thinking about it...

In the other universe, Kirk's universe - his universe now - they had found the oasis, spent a week there... He remembered the beauty of the desert after a sudden storm soaked everything... But the ruined city of Sas-a-Shar no longer existed there save as a few low, broken fragments of wall projecting scant inches above the sand. He had said nothing to Kirk then of this place - what point? He had not expected ever to see it again. But he had noticed.

Differences between the universes. What feature - or features - had gone into the building of Sas-a-Shar that had preserved it here but not in the other universe? A shield...against decay? But one that also acted as a shield against a form of communication this world did not possess.

Not logical.

The mind touch worked through any shielding known to modern Vulcan - in the other, telepathic Vulcan - save personal shielding, and even that was ineffective against the full bondmate link. Ah. Could it be... Could it be that in the past this Vulcan had been telepathic? That his latent ability had been, not a developing trait, but a throwback?

In that case...

Shielding. Shielding against telepathy. That could only mean a telepathic race that lacked the natural ability to shut out other thoughts - or feared telepathic probing, spying. Perhaps both, thought Spock, remembering his world's warrior past. They could have instituted a programme of breeding for low telepathic ability, deliberately suppressing it, but the ability could still be there, dormant; and in his case... In his case, even the recessive Vulcan genes were dominant over the Human ones save where they complemented them.

Developing such a shield, incorporating it into their buildings, must have taken absolute genius. And only at Sas-a-Shar did it still exist, for only Sas-a-Shar was so ancient, preserved - ironic thought - by the desert that had destroyed it.

Spock felt an intense pity for the generations of Vulcans denied the completion of mental contact with their loved ones due to that possibly deliberate suppression of the ability. Why couldn't his remote ancestors have instituted, instead, a breeding programme designed to develop personal shielding and control? And yet...

It was selfish, he knew, but for his own sake he was suddenly glad that they had not. If he had known mental contact with the original Kirk, would he have survived all those lonely years until he found Jim? The first Kirk had been very dear to him; but Jim... Jim touched a protective instinct in him - one that was rarely needed now - that Kirk had never touched. Close friends though they had been, Kirk had not needed him as Jim needed him. Was that what made the difference? The instinct, the need to protect, that would normally have been directed towards his wife and children, redirected towards his friend because he lacked any sexual drive? He wanted an equal partner, but he also needed to be needed. Jim satisfied both requirements. And because of this satisfaction, his emotional needs had finally been met.

Jim...what is keeping you so long out of contact?

The light began to fade, and Spock stirred restlessly. There was still no sign of Jim; could he have fallen in the ruins, hurt himself?

He would not deliberately have remained so long out of contact. Even if he had been so absorbed in studying the ruins that he had lost track of time, the quickly-gathering darkness would have warned him, and he would have made contact to reassure his bondmate. Something was wrong...

Spock's first instinct was to head for the ruins immediately, but his own words to Kirk stopped him. Berating himself for not accompanying his friend, knowing that he must now leave the oasis deserted tomorrow anyway, he could only wait through the interminable hours of darkness for daylight. He had never missed the moon that he had never known, but moonlight would have been useful now. Not that he was in any great danger of losing his way if he was to start out now, for his night vision was excellent; but there were too many nocturnal predators whose night vision was better than his own, and while Vulcan training had taught him how to handle them, it had also taught him the folly of trying to handle them at night, in their own territory.

He forced himself to relax, knowing that he would not sleep, but knowing also that he must rest.

Kirk opened his eyes. He could see only darkness.

Blind? How could he be blind? He rubbed his eyes, and the pressure caused him to see light patterns for a moment. Ah. He was in a darkened environment, then. But where?

After his contact with Spock, he had gone back into the ruins. He spent some time exploring the first house fairly thoroughly, then was moved to

investigate a passageway, dimly lit by a few windows widely spaced, that followed the outside wall. It appeared to be another street, but one that was wholly covered from the sky - perhaps a wet-weather route for the people living in the houses, for doorways opened into each house he passed.

The basic design of each was the same; three or four rooms, the inner ones dark, unlit except by the light that filtered in through the doorways, the outer ones opening onto the main street. Not much light came through the windows, either, for the street outside was very narrow. These houses could not have been very comfortable to live in.

After a while, he came to a cross tunnel running off at right angles to the one he was following. It seemed likely that this one would go on unchanged until he came to the next gateway, so he turned along the side passage.

Almost at once, it widened. The windows here were slightly closer together, and the passageway was, as a result, brighter. He went into the first house he came to.

It also was larger than the ones that huddled beside the walls; the windows were larger, and all the rooms had windows; he looked out of one onto a fairly open space - a yard. Perhaps it had even been a garden once, though nothing grew here now.

He spent some time wandering through the maze of tunnels interconnecting the houses, never once having to move into open air in order to cross from one building to another. Strange that these people had had both an open-air system of roads and this covered one.

Finally, he began to think it was about time he headed back for the oasis, and that the next house along the passage must be the last he investigated. He was part-way along the passage towards it when something hit him on the head.

Now, conscious again, he lay wondering what had hit him. It was highly unlikely that something had fallen from the roof just as he passed; there were no fallen stones lying in the passages, so the buildings were still safe enough despite the time they had been lying empty.

He sat up, feeling around. No. This had not been an accident. He was lying on one of the old wooden beds that had been left in some of the houses, and he was alone. He got up, and felt his way carefully to the wall. He groped round it, coming at last to a doorway. The door fitted it perfectly - and was locked.

Definitely not an accident. Someone was living here, in the ruins - someone who had renovated part of the old city for some purpose that was still obscure.

Kirk groped his way back to the bed and lay down again. Absolute darkness... and no sound. Not even the soft sighing of the wind that he had been marginally aware of all the time he had been exploring. He nodded, understanding.

Whoever had attacked him could have no good reason for being here. Captive, he was being subjected to sensory deprivation.

After a while susceptibility to suggestion would be increased. The susceptibility would be heightened if his captors starved him too. Once he was weakened they would add to the strain on his nerves, even possibly using drugs.

However, there was one thing that his captors might not know. He had Federation Command Training. Although it had not helped him to defy the mental enslavement of the Captain, most known methods of conditioning were ineffective against Command training - and added to that was the mental shielding Spock had taught him, a factor his captors could not know. He lay back, relaxing, and remembered the lectures.

Don't panic. Don't waste energy trying to explore your environment. You are in a small, darkened room and nothing you can do can alter that fact.

You will be here for hours, seeing nothing, hearing nothing. Face the initial boredom. Sleep will help pass the time, but your captors may be watching, using infra-red cameras. They will know if you sleep, and compensate; you will be left long enough to allow your critical faculties to become dulled.

Keep your mind active. Think. Review everything you have ever memorised. Plan a new colony, a town, even what crops you would grow if you had a farm.

Does Spock know yet that something has happened to me? But even if he does, what can he do? If he comes looking for me, he will be captured too...

What would Spock do - what could Spock do, even if he escaped capture by whoever was hiding here? He could not go back to the Starbase, find Sendak, ask for help...if he did he would be arrested again, and anyway, how could he ask for help for a dead man? A second escape from the Starbase would be impossible; McCoy and Scotty had already stuck their necks out far enough, and Sendak... Sendak had his duty to consider.

How could they ever hope to escape from the dark maze that was opening up in front of them, escape back to their own universe with the formula for the drug that would save Bones? The utter hopelessness of their situation threatened to drag Kirk down to total despair.

The hours passed, but they did not drag. Kirk resolutely put his fears aside, firmly keeping his mind fixed on optimistic thoughts. Against all hope, he had been rescued from the Captain; against all hope, Spock had finally found a new world where there was a Jim Kirk to welcome him. Somehow they would win through again.

The solitude itself did not trouble him, though he could understand that it might have been a trouble to others, for solitude and he were old companions; a companion he had never welcomed, but one he could still tolerate.

He slept for a while, and woke again. Startled for a moment, he remembered where he was and relaxed with a grim determination. Soon, his captors would surely come for him, question him.

What answers could he give? Nothing of value to them, no matter how subtly they questioned. Even if they broke him completely, his answers would be meaningless, and probably not believed.

I am a Human member of Starfleet on leave, he told himself. I was camping in the desert, came away from camp for a walk, and got lost. I know nothing about the Starbase, its personnel...

Where was Spock? Was he, too, a prisoner already, also awaiting interrogation?

Lights suddenly snapped on, and with a startled cry he flung up his arm to cover his eyes as the sudden brilliance stabbed at the dilated pupils with dagger-sharp intensity. Rough hands grasped his arms, pulling him ungentle to his feet, and dragged him forward. He did not resist, knowing it was pointless, but he did wish they had delayed long enough to let his eyes adjust to the light. As it was, he went blindly where they led, blinking furiously as his eyes slowly adapted; by the time they reached the solid wooden door at the end of the long corridor, he could see again.

The windows of this part of the corridor had been shuttered, and lights installed. Not surprising. He managed to look at his captors as one of them knocked at the door. Pointed ears...but the uniforms...

They were Romulans.

There was a single, sharp word uttered from behind the door. "Enter." The Romulan language here seemed harsher than in his own universe - he had a fair

knowledge of it as a result of the Captain's friendship with the Romulan Commander Tal, and he knew that he would be better advised to keep that fact to himself. He let himself be pushed into the room.

There was a desk in the room; behind it sat four figures that Kirk did not have time to see properly as he was hustled forward to the single chair that stood in front of the desk.

He was pushed into the chair, his wrists fastened to the arms of it with metal bands. Then he had time to look up at the four figures facing him.

A woman, slim, beautiful in the marble-sculpture perfection of most Vulcanoid females - and as warmblooded as a statue too, Kirk realised after a quick glance at her eyes. She seemed young, but Kirk knew that it was a mistake to judge - even to try to judge - her age. Here was the classic beauty that would be unchanged even by the years, timeless as stone - and as cold.

The other three interrogators were men; one, grey-haired and wrinkled, whose face looked as if he could be kind...but the eyes, again, were cold and calculating; a second man, plump-faced and vaguely familiar...and...Spock?

Could it be? Somehow?

It seemed impossible, and yet...had not Spock already accomplished the impossible? Not once, but many times? And with no way of telling how long he had been a prisoner - it might have been hours, or days - Spock might well have succeeded in tracing his bondmate, and planned a rescue.

There was, of course, a way to be certain; a way which was uniquely theirs in this universe, one which would not betray them if he used it - and most important, a way which admitted no possibility of deceit or trickery.

Tentatively, Kirk opened his mind, reaching out towards this man in welcome, and met - blankness, a curtain of no response that still had an undercurrent of hatred. He snapped his mental shields into place instantly, instinctively, concentrating on intensifying them, protecting himself against the hate.

No. This man was not Spock, although he resembled him so closely. Kirk saw the eyes more clearly now, and their cold ruthlessness reminded him of the Captain. Even so had he looked...on that now seldom remembered but still and always horrifying, horrible day when he had killed Scotty and then, his hands red with the dead man's blood, had drawn his helpless living victim into a pitiless embrace.

Romulans had not evolved with the same telepathic skills as Vulcans, Kirk knew, and in this universe even Vulcan telepathic ability was latent; the thought was comforting, although he saw the way the man who looked so like Spock was now studying him. It was as if he had been aware of that mind touch even although he had not responded to it, and Kirk found himself wondering if, here, it was the Romulans who had the telepathic ability. If so, he must be careful. He had already betrayed himself.

"Your name?" The questioner was the man who looked vaguely familiar.

"James Kirk." At least the Romulans couldn't know that in this universe James T. Kirk was dead, had been dead for twenty years. If by any chance they did know the name, his youth would lead them to believe, as McCoy had done, that he was a son of the dead man.

"You are a Starfleet officer? A Commander?"

"Yes." There was no point in denying it - phrased as a question it might be, but these men surely knew the uniform.

"Your business here?"

"I am on leave and camping in the desert nearby. I...happened on the place by chance." Careful. Keep as close to the truth as possible...You lie very badly, James...

"By chance?" The voice was scornful. "Do you take us for fools?"

"I knew only that the ruins of the ancient city of Sas-a-Shar were in this neighbourhood. I did not know exactly where. I was looking - idly - for the ruins, not thinking I would also find...what I found."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes." It wasn't a lie, he thought; at the moment, he was alone. Spock was back at the little oasis and must by now be frantically worried.

"You camp in the desert, and you have no companion?"

"There are few Humans on Vulcan," Kirk said, still truthfully. "Vulcans... do not readily associate with Humans save in a business capacity."

He saw the interrogators nodding, and sighed inwardly. As long as Spock's presence remained unsuspected, there was a chance.

"Where are you based?"

If you only knew! "I cannot tell you that."

Pain lanced from the metal bands restraining his wrists and shot up his arms. He gasped. The question was repeated.

"I cannot tell you." This time, expecting it, he was able to control the pain.

"You would be wiser to tell us what we want to know," the woman said, her clear voice cold despite the sympathy she clearly strove to impart. "My colleagues are...impatient men; and while we fully appreciate your loyalty to your Federation, we cannot permit your loyalty to interfere with our duty."

Kirk took a deep breath. "I will not, if I can avoid it, permit your duty to interfere with my loyalty. None of you will respect a traitor, no matter how hard you try to break me."

There was the briefest of pauses, then -

"Where are you based?"

"I cannot tell you." Grimly he held on to the fragile control of pain Spock had taught him.

"In what capacity do you serve Starfleet?"

"I cannot tell...Ah!" His face twisted in pain as augmented agony convulsed his body.

"You are so foolish to defy us," the woman said. "We do not want to harm you..."

Kirk managed a wry grin. "The brutal interrogator, giving pain...and the supposedly sympathetic one, trying to persuade. It won't work; you've been miscast in that role, Lady."

Fury showed for a second, distorting the classically-beautiful face into an ugly mask; her hand moved, stabbed down onto the desk, and Kirk's body convulsed as he tried to choke back a scream. The older man caught her arm and wrenched her finger from the control, speaking urgently in Romulan. Kirk's knowledge of the language was not sufficient for him to follow the unfamiliar dialect, especially since part of his mind was wholly occupied with regaining control of himself, but he could guess the gist of it - 'Would you destroy him before we have picked his mind clean?'

She spat back a brief answer. This Kirk did understand. "No man so insults me!"

"The truth is not an insult." Man and woman stared coldly at each other for a moment, then the woman sat back, her lips set. It seemed that her colleagues held little love for her, but that would not help him.

Or...was all this an elaborate bluff? Were his captors intelligent enough to try a double bluff, to pretend that this inept attempt was by the 'sympathetic' interrogator while in actual fact it was the older man who had been cast in that role? It did not seem impossible.

They're all enemies, he reminded himself. This was not his universe, where the Romulans were loosely allied to the Federation. In this universe, the Romulans were hostile.

The questioner had ignored the interruption. Waiting only until there was silence again, he said quietly, "Where were you based?"

With a shock, Kirk suddenly realised why this man seemed so familiar.

Tal.

Tal, who had been a friend of the Captain's - perhaps his closest friend. But this was a Tal many years older, plumper, and Kirk remembered again that everyone in this universe was older than his counterpart in his own.

Tal. Kirk remembered the subtle, sly cruelty of the Tal he knew, and felt fear. In each universe the basic characteristics are the same. That conversation with Spock, so long ago now it seemed, offered no comfort, only reason for increased apprehension. He drew his defences as firmly about him as he could.

"I have nothing to tell you."

Spock set off at first light, having carefully manufactured a message for McCoy that - he hoped - nobody else finding it would be able to understand, and headed for the old ruins at a rapid trot.

He paused as he reached the walls. It would take a long time to search the whole city; where was Jim most likely to have gone? His mind reached out, encountering...

Thoughts. Faint... The mind touch was unfamiliar. Not Jim. Who, then? Who could be here?

Starfleet Security, looking for him? Unlikely. No-one could get this far into the desert without a vehicle in the time available, and he did not think that anyone knew or guessed at the help McCoy had given them. If the surgeon's part in this had been discovered, Scotty would have warned them; and besides, the searchers would have gone directly to the oasis, not to the ruined city. No. Not Starfleet.

Who else could it be?

Memory of his arrest made him cautious. He could not assume that it was a stranger - or a friend. He could not afford to be re-arrested; a second escape would be...extremely difficult to engineer.

In spite of his increasing anxiety, therefore, he moved slowly, cautiously, towards the source of the thoughts, his mental shields firmly in place.

The thoughts were...not random, but not coherent either. It was rather as if someone never exposed to telepathic communication - and of course, no-one here ever was - was sitting thinking, one train of thought leading to another, not suspecting that his thoughts could be monitored.

//Wonder if that was a spy we caught? Seems odd, though, that the Vulcans would use an Earthling for a spy... Tal'll soon get the truth out of him...

Hot...even the wind blows hot here... What I'd give for a blast of cool air from the Roshar Icecap! Even the polar regions are hot on this twice-damned planet... Just at night the temperature drops to a comfortable level for a hour or two... Why did the Praetor not think to man this expedition with men from the equatorial zone? They'd find it comfortable enough. But I suppose they've all been sent to some ice planet somewhere...//

Earthling? Spy? It had to be Jim. Who were these people? The Praetor ... Tal...

Romulans!

What were Romulans doing here? They were the spies...

Careful. He must be careful. It would not benefit Jim if he were captured too.

Jim. He must have walked right into them, unsuspecting. Even after three years Spock had no difficulty in thinking of the Romulans as enemy, but to Jim they were - had always been - allied to the Federation. It was not outwith the bounds of possibility that Jim had approached them openly, momentarily believing them to be exploring the ruins as he was.

Jim, if they have harmed you... Involuntarily his hands clenched, and he forced himself to relax. Watch. Learn. Plan. All his fiercely-aroused, protective instincts were brought firmly under control - anger and sheer physical strength would not save Jim now, but subtlety and cunning might.

Spock made his cautious way on, watchful, wary, until he saw the Romulan whose thoughts he had detected. The man stood beside a doorway, half leaning against the wall, apparently on guard, an air of laxity about him. Spock recognised the condition immediately; it was often suffered by Humans when they were first based on Vulcan. Caused by the heat, it had a semi-soporific effect on its victims; it was not dangerous, and was self-curing as the body adapted to the heat - or when the external temperature fell - but during its course the victim was half asleep without realising it.

Half asleep or not, though, the guard was still going to be alert enough to challenge anyone approaching the doorway.

Spock watched the sleepy guard for some time, noting that he was becoming more and more drowsy. Perhaps he could make a move before very long...

Another Romulan came through the doorway, and the guard straightened with an effort. The low-voiced exchange came clearly to the Vulcan's ears; although one or two words were in a dialect unfamiliar to him, he understood what was said well enough.

"Just as well it's me relieving you, Decius - the Commander doesn't take kindly to men sleeping on duty. Remember what happened to Tovar - reduced to common Footman, and a flogging to rub it in."

"It's this cursed heat, Caius. It would make a sea'mander sleepy. Anyway, what's to guard in this bedevilled wasteland?"

"We've already caught one intruder, remember? His story may be true - it's typical of Earthlings to waste time 'studying' ruins - but the Commander still doesn't believe he was alone."

Decius yawned widely. "I'm for bed. Quiet guard, Caius." He disappeared, and Spock sighed softly.

At least he knew that Kirk was a prisoner; there could not possibly have been another Human exploring Sas-a-Shar. But...how was Kirk being treated? The Romulans had a reputation for cold-bloodedness, and were unlikely to be gentle with an unco-operative prisoner; the thought of Kirk in their hands was...

He could forget about this entrance. Caius looked alert, the heat clearly giving him little trouble. Spock probed cautiously with his mind, but the man was intent on his duty, his thoughts concerned only with analysing the faint desert sounds. He might get bored in a few hours, but... Spock withdrew the mind touch, and retreated circumspectly.

He prowled the ruins, finding the next two entrances also guarded, and began to construct a mental picture of the Romulan base, thinking back to his memories of the ruins as he had explored them so many years previously.

The city consisted of a maze of houses connected by long corridors as well as the more limited streets. Parts were built on a more open plan than others, and these three entrances led to an area that had reminded Spock of the High Council Buildings where all of Vulcan's affairs were handled, being Parliament and Law Court and Foreign Affairs all in one; even all major businesses had agents there. It was probable, Spock had considered, that this was the Ancients' version of the High Council Buildings, although in the days of Sas-a-Shar's greatness there had been no Vulcan High Council; each region had had its own Council. Interlinked as all the rooms were, it would make an excellent base for an enemy; add to that, it was at the same time remote and yet near enough to both the Starbase and the capital city. Yes, an excellent base.

As he considered this, Spock became aware of the encroaching darkness. How had a day gone past so quickly? He must find shelter... He ducked through a gateway a little way from the nearest guard, checked that there were no signs of the Romulans using this part of the old city, and curled up - not to sleep, his anxiety about Kirk prevented that - but to preserve his body heat against the night chill. At least Jim did not have to worry too much about it; what was cold to a Vulcan was still reasonably mild to a Human.

Darkness. . Silence.

Kirk moved uneasily on the bed, suddenly realising that in fact the Romulans seemed to have very little idea of the most effective use of sensory deprivation. His physical discomfort, caused by the hardness of the bed, gave him something to concentrate on. The darkness was probably due to their preserving whatever light source they used - why waste light on a mere prisoner? - and the silence, to the door and windows having been sealed up. At least he did not feel cold - the temperature had dropped to a comfortable level, and was unlikely to sink lower.

There was a residual ache in his body from the pain inflicted by his interrogators, and he concentrated on relaxing, trying to gather strength, but a dull throbbing behind his eyes, not intense enough to be called pain, worried him.

Kirk knew what it was, although he had never experienced it before. It was what Spock had warned him might happen if they remained too long out of contact. To distract himself from the discomfort Kirk began to think back over the interrogation. Or rather, to consider the interrogators.

Tal, as unpleasant here as in the other universe. Yet of the two, he felt that he preferred this one. His unpleasantness was not semi-disguised behind suavity and apparent good fellowship - nor did he have his counterpart's knowledge of Kirk's past.

The woman. Was it his imagination, or did she have a personal, rather than a professional, hatred for him? No, wait...a hatred of his counterpart? No. His counterpart had been dead for twenty years. Or...the mistake that McCoy had made, Scotty had made, that he had hoped the Romulans might make if they recognised his name. Had she in fact made it? Hated him for his likeness to the man she thought must be his father? It was...not impossible. Perhaps Spock might know. In any case, that hatred had led her into one mistake - it might lead her into another.

The older man, who seemed sympathetic in an impersonal way. He was doing a job, and seemed motivated by neither hatred nor direct sympathy. In some ways he might be the most dangerous of the four.

Or might he? The fourth interrogator was a complete enigma. His resemblance to Spock was unnerving, unsettling, and his role still uncertain. Alone of the interrogators he had said nothing, merely watching with cold, calculating eyes. Under other circumstances Kirk might have suspected him of mind probing, but he had felt nothing, no hint of telepathic contact, no attempt to force his shields. To be on the safe side, however, he had used energy consolidating his mental defences that he would have preferred to use to control the pain that was inflicted.

He would have to continue to maintain his shielding, as well. He could not be certain the Romulan was not playing a waiting game. His own mind could only reach Spock, since he himself was not telepathic. Might that have been why he detected nothing? Though he would have expected at least to sense a telepathic ability in the man. But he could well have betrayed himself to a more skilled telepath with that first tentative reaching out, and the Romulan could be waiting until he was too tired to maintain his shield.

Kirk moved again, trying to find a more comfortable position against the phantom ache in his arms and shoulders that persisted in spite of all his attempts to block it out by relaxation and the control Spock had taught him. He had not thought of surrendering to the Romulans, but was wryly amused at the continued realisation that if they did eventually succeed in breaking him, he could tell them nothing that would be of value to them - and they would probably not believe him anyway.

The slow hours passed; a faint grey light showed the rectangle of the doorway as a dim opening. Spock stirred. He was stiff with lying curled up against the cold, and stretched cautiously before heading for the door. At it, he paused, listening carefully, his mind alert to any trace of conscious thought nearby.

Nothing.

No sound, no movement.

It was more than probable that apart from the guards who would certainly have been left at the three gates, everyone on the base was still asleep. Dawn was early in this latitude at this time of year.

The supposition did not make him any less alert as he moved warily along the corridor in the general direction of what he considered had to be the enemy base, ears and mind stretched to the limit. Jim had certainly been taken unaware, thinking himself alone here; Spock knew otherwise. He could not risk being captured. Only if he remained free would he be of any help to Jim.

He was a pace past the doorway with the well-fitting wooden door before he realised what he had seen, and stopped. He must be doubly cautious now; he was into the Romulan base. He listened carefully at the door, but heard nothing.

Strange that the Romulans had not set guards here, where the base joined the rest of the ruins...or perhaps not. Anyone entering the ruins by one of the other entrances would have some distance to go before they reached here; most visitors - if indeed any Vulcan ever came - would concentrate their exploration on the buildings where they entered the city, and few would move very much further afield. Humans might explore superficially, and would probably discover as much of interest as a Vulcan's more detailed examination.

Spock passed several more doors, and paused by each to listen, still hearing nothing and detecting no trace of thought. Surely the Romulans had not left overnight? No, of course not; he was forgetting the strange attribute of the ruins. Something about them inhibited telepathic contact, even at the modern wooden doors.

Ahead of him a door opened, and Spock shrank back against a doorway, knowing that if the Romulan turned his way he could not hope to remain undetected. Random factors were operating in his favour, it seemed; the man turned the other way, and marched briskly off down the corridor. Watching him from the doubtful shelter of the doorway, Spock decided that he was an ordinary soldier, not an officer.

A guard, going on duty? It was not impossible; the guards at the gates must be due for relief soon.

The man disappeared round the corner at the end of the corridor, and Spock left his 'shelter' and followed him. He was just at the door the man had come out of when it opened, and another Romulan stepped into the corridor.

There was only one thing to do. Before the man had time to register the presence of a stranger, Spock reached out quickly, grasping the shoulder, pressing the vulnerable nerve. The Romulan collapsed.

Spock pulled him into the room, hoping that there was no-one else in there.

The room was empty. Spock breathed a sigh of relief, and turned his attention to his victim. This one was an officer; his uniform ornate enough to denote high rank. And then Spock saw the man's face.

It was like looking into a mirror. For a split second he thought of the dead Captain, his mind fighting the illogical thought that it was the Captain, recovered and defected to the Romulans; then he firmly reminded himself that the Captain's body was in the cellar, still guarding the damaged mechanism that had taken him to Kirk.

Someone up there likes us. He had heard the expression on Human lips without completely understanding why they said it; now he understood. This was good fortune beyond anything he could have dared to hope for.

There were several degrees of neck pinch, the mildest intended only to disorientate the victim for a few seconds; the one he had used on his present captive had been the more common one designed to keep the victim unconscious for a short while. Now, he pressed the Romulan's shoulder again, this time applying the pressure that would keep him unconscious for several hours. Then he moved his hands to the man's face, positioning them for a mind meld. Even unconscious, the mind would reveal at least facts and opinions formed during the last hours, facts and opinions that had not yet had time to sink into the subconscious.

The name was...Flavius. His job...Security. He was currently on the interrogation team that was examining a captured Terran...one with an oddly powerful mental shield.

Spock stiffened at that, and probed deeper. Flavius was himself mildly telepathic - a receptive telepath, his ability making him feared among his people, and ensuring that Security was the only job in which he would be accepted. He hated the world because of it - there could be no doubting. His hatred was strong enough to be close, close to the surface of his thoughts. His own people feared him, did not accept him - and he hated them. He was on the interrogation team to ensure that if the Terran did tell them anything, what he was saying was the truth. He had not been able to detect any of the Human's thoughts save a fleeting touch right at the start of the interrogation before the man's shields snapped into place.

So far the Terran had told them nothing of importance, despite the use of the neural bracelets at force 5. Of course, if that bitch had not used force 10 on him for that moment when he had recognised her for what she was... After that, force 5 was probably a relief. Perhaps today...

Spock sat up, pulling his mind from that hate-filled one with relief, his thoughts racing furiously. The interrogation was almost due...

Moving rapidly he re-established the link, impressing on Flavius' memory that he had felt ill today; he had risen, made to go into the corridor, and felt dizzy. He had gone back into his room and collapsed...

Then he searched the chest that stood beside the bed for clothes. Fortunately that the Romulan was also the same height and build as himself. A second uniform was quickly forthcoming; Spock put it on, glad that it was loose enough - and tight-fitting enough at wrists and neck - to cover and hide his own clothes. He could not leave a Starfleet uniform behind.

Spock checked himself quickly in the polished metal mirror, and made for the door. If one of the common soldiers came in now to clean the room while his senior officer was on duty, he would find the unconscious man, but - hopefully - would not realise that a second 'Flavius' had gone to take his place on the interrogation panel. And the false memory he had implanted would certainly delay discovery.

He closed the door firmly behind him and headed down the corridor, reminding himself that he had every right to be here. There was a moment of indecision when he reached the end of the corridor, then the Flavius memories took over, and he turned right confidently. Twenty yards, and he reached the heavy wooden door that led to the interrogation room.

The other three interrogators were already assembled, and Spock looked at them consideringly, as Flavius' memory supplied the names.

Tal, plump and unreliable...and familiar.

Vargos. An unknown quantity, even to Flavius.

Thula. Cold and calculating...and horribly, terribly, maliciously familiar.

Spock's mind went back over the years. How long had it been? Twenty three years at least. A spy mission. Capture a Romulan cloaking device. Somehow. Anyhow.

And they had done it, he and Kirk. It was not a memory he was proud of. Thula, Commander of the Romulan vessel that had intercepted them...like Kirk, isolated in command. Unlike Kirk, so very, very alone, not even able to call her second-in-command - Tal - her friend. She had been very vulnerable...and so very, very susceptible when he, Spock, had appeared to succumb to her persuasion.

He had been impressed by her, he admitted to himself. Impressed by her efficiency, her obvious ability in command...her decisive, incisive mind. But at the same time... Her underlying coldbloodedness had repelled him, and it had taken a real effort for him to pretend an attraction he had not really felt.

He had never quite understood why, in that final moment before the Enterprise retrieved him, she had come over and put her arms round him. She had undoubtedly recognised the transporter hum. Kirk had suggested that she had been trying to prevent his escape, that perhaps the Romulan transporters did not work with two people in such close proximity, for she had certainly not had time enough to call in the guards that she had so foolishly dismissed; Romulan technology was known - at that time - to be less advanced than that of the Federation or the Klingon Empire.

Well, whatever the reason, Thula had found herself on board a Federation vessel. He did not deny her courage; she had been quick to order Tal to fire on the Enterprise, even knowing it would mean her death.

They had escaped - just - and put her ashore as soon as possible. She had been returned to her own people by the Federation, and he had put her out of his mind. Now he was being forced to reconsider her.

How much had Jim suffered because of her presence here? In his universe, those events had not happened, could not while the treaty between the Romulans and the Federation held, and although Jim knew many Romulan officers - Tal, in particular, more closely than he would have liked - Thula was a complete stranger to him.

For her part, she must know that Jim was not the Captain Kirk she had known. At that time, Kirk had been at least ten years older than his youthful counterpart.

Spock called on Flavius' thoughts again. They told him very little. Thula had hated Flavius, and he had never known why - but he returned the hatred with full measure.

And...she had exhibited that same vicious hatred towards the prisoner; Flavius had wondered why. It was a personal loathing of the young Human, not duty, that had sent her finger pressing down on the button that controlled the neural bracelets - a curious action that should be investigated...and would be, when the question of the spy had been settled.

The Vulcan found himself wondering what Thula's career had been since they removed her from her ship.

The Praetor did not look kindly on any of his officers who was defeated; that much was known. She would have lost her command, perhaps even her right to command another starship ever again. But this was clearly a job of some responsibility, small though this base almost certainly was. But...a job shared by Tal? Had he, also, been a victim of those events of twenty-three years ago?

Responsibility. Perhaps. They were on an enemy planet where they were in perpetual danger of discovery. It must indicate that they were at least trusted still - or again. They were not, could not be, solely interrogators. Their chances of capturing Vulcan officers - or even Humans based on Vulcan - were slight. Spock let Flavius' memory surface again.

Ah. Their job was also to monitor the loyalty of their own people.

Charming! If the Praetor could not trust his own men...perhaps one day a Federation/Romulan treaty might be possible here, too.

The opening door snapped off his train of thought. He watched with well-concealed anxiety as Jim was escorted in.

Kirk was pale, but clearly in full control of himself, moving with a quiet dignity that was eloquent with defiance.

Despite the peril in which they stood Spock felt a surge of pride and admiration fill him. This was the man his counterpart had terrorised and abused ... What might Kirk have done, what might he have achieved, if his Spock had been worthy of him?

Dare he reach out to Kirk's mind?

He wanted - oh how he wanted - to reassure his friend; but could Jim disguise his relief if he felt the unexpected mind touch? It was probable; the Human's control had improved tremendously in the three years they had been together. But no; it was better not to take the risk.

Jim was fastened into the chair; Spock stiffened fractionally as Flavius' memory/knowledge told him what the metal bands were for. His mind worked frantically - he could not permit this interrogation...yet how could he stop it?

Already Tal was beginning the monotonous, repetitive questioning; to every question Jim simply answered, "I have nothing to say," then stiffened slightly but noticeably as Tal stabbed at the button that sent agony coursing through his body.

At least he's managing to control it, block it to some extent, Spock thought with a sick despair, for strong though Kirk's mind was, he was Human, and his control was limited. A mental probe told him that the others were all enjoying Jim's pain; although trying to break his resistance, they were in fact in no hurry to do so. It sickened him.

Abruptly he reached over and stopped Tal's hand as it stabbed down once more.

"This accomplishes nothing."

"We have answers to get, for the good of the Empire."

"There are more subtle ways." Spock spoke softly, knowing that their only chance lay in his action during the next few minutes. He managed to counterfeit a note of menace, the sight of Kirk's pale, perspiring face lending conviction to his tone.

"Give me an hour alone with him. I doubt I will need so long. He has been well conditioned by now."

"The sympathetic role is hardly your style, Flavius," Thula commented, the ice-cool voice filled with hatred.

Flavius' memory informed him of her humiliation at Jim's hand yesterday. "Still less is it yours, Lady." He used the slightly mocking tone that he instinctively felt Flavius would employ. No, the years had not improved her, had merely intensified the burning ambition that had been in her...always. "We have nothing to lose. And I do have an...advantage...none of you possess." Flavius himself was hardly likely to call it an advantage, he knew, but it was unlikely that his colleagues realised that.

"True," Vargas admitted. "Very well - he is yours, Flavius."

Spock signalled the guards. "Take him..." Take him where? Not to Flavius' room, though that would be the obvious place. "...Back to his cell."

They released the Human, who was staring at him defiantly, and Spock was compelled to drop his eyes to conceal the affection he knew he was revealing. This was indeed the companion he had sought for so many weary years, self-assured, courageous...and oh, so loyal and loving.

Leaving the three Romulans, Spock followed the guards as they hustled Kirk out. As he went, he increased his sensitivity to his companions' thoughts, but could read nothing but a combination of fear and hatred, a desperate attempt to maintain a shielding inadequate because it was needed so seldom.

The guards did not appear to share their superiors' dislike of the telepathic Flavius; perhaps they had not been told of his ability, marginal though Spock knew it to be. Their minds were unshielded, open...and not particularly informative to Spock.

One was desperately homesick, and terrified that his officers should discover it. Flavius did know...but in a rare moment of sympathy had chosen to keep the knowledge to himself, although he should have reported the man's weakness. The memory told Spock that other than the officers, the men did not know that Flavius was telepathic; part of his duty was to monitor the men's thoughts. But - although he would report treasonable or disloyal thoughts without a moment's hesitation, he was quite surprisingly sympathetic towards men like this, fiercely loyal to the Empire and the Praetor, serving both with unquestioning obedience, but never happy away from their homes. If his homesickness was discovered, the man would be returned home...but in disgrace, his entire family shamed that he should be so weak. But he had fought his weakness so that he could serve the Empire as he wished to do; and Flavius, who did not wish to serve the Empire in this fashion, hating everyone, himself not least, considered that the man's courage was greater than his weakness.

The other guard was thinking rather of the more customary activities of the soldiers. His winnings at rathlast night were substantial...now if his luck only lasted another night or two, he would have amassed enough money to buy that bit of land when his tour of duty ended... He'd get a good choice of wife, too...an ex-soldier with his own farm...

Spock rather doubted it. Rath - Flavius' memory identified it as a gambling game - was an uncertain way of gathering enough money for anything, and a fondness for it virtually ensured that he'd lose the lot before long. It was this man's perpetual - and impossible - dream. So far Flavius had done nothing, for there was no treason in the man's thoughts; many of the soldiers had similar fantasies. But...he monitored these thoughts more closely than those of the homesick one, for that one had no thoughts of what would come after his discharge; he was intent on his duty.

Both men would be punished for what Spock planned to do; he felt sorry, but Jim's safety was more important to him than that of an unknown enemy.

The guards marched Kirk into his cell. Spock entered behind them, and once safely inside reached for the vulnerable shoulder nerves. The guards collapsed soundlessly.

Kirk swung round as the grip of their hands eased, to see the interrogator straightening.

"Jim... Jim, are you all right?"

Kirk looked at the anxious eyes studying him. How could it be? And yet...

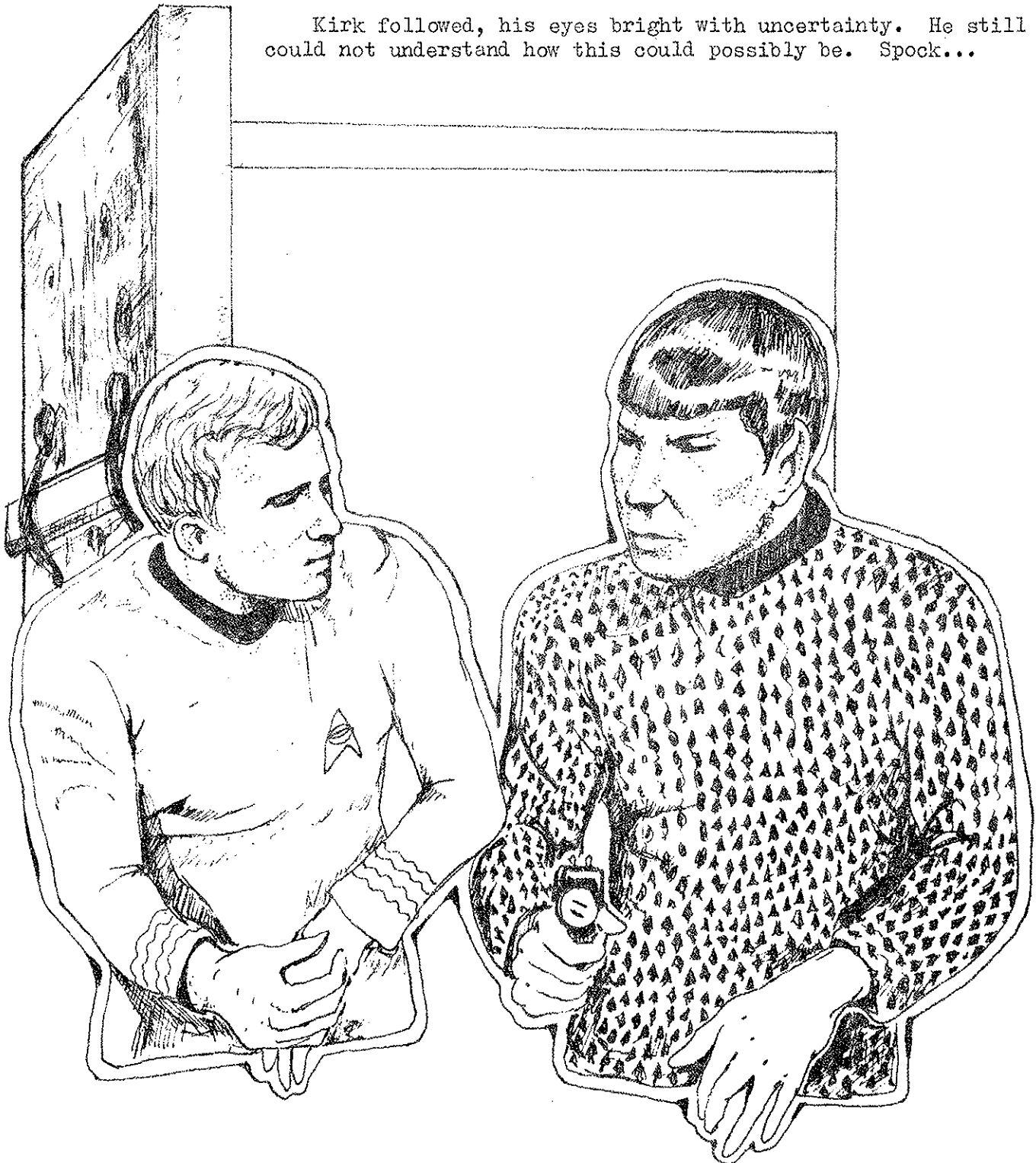
Spock could guess at his friends thoughts. Subjected to interrogation over many hours, of course he must be suspecting that this was a trick, an attempt to break his resistance through kindness.

Very well, then. Get Jim out of here first. Then check that he was all right.

He bent over the guards. It would probably make little difference, but... Spock quickly stripped the uniform off the rath player and gave it to Kirk. "Put this on... Come now." He took Kirk's arm and pulled him to the door.

Spock checked that the corridor was clear, and led the way out. He turned away from the Romulan complex and moved quickly, cautiously, along the corridor.

Kirk followed, his eyes bright with uncertainty. He still could not understand how this could possibly be. Spock...



Certainly no Romulan would be interested in helping him. It had to be Spock...

It was the Romulan lack of guards in the inner part of the city that saved them. They moved quickly along the corridor; through a house and into another corridor, and onwards in the general direction of the oasis. Distant shouts reached the Vulcan.

Suddenly they were at a gateway. Worried, Spock looked at Kirk. "Can you run?"

"Yes." It was not the entire truth; Kirk knew that he might be able to run for a short distance, but he certainly couldn't keep it up for long.

"Come."

They ran, Kirk as fast as he could, Spock keeping pace with him, for several hundred yards before they reached a cluster of rocks. Spock, knowing that Kirk had reached almost the limit of his present endurance, pulled his bondmate down and urged him under an overhanging rock, rolling in beside him.

"The alarm is raised," Spock breathed, knowing that Kirk's relatively less sensitive ears would not have detected the shouting.

Kirk nodded.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Oh Spock, I'm sorry!"

"Sorry?"

"For worrying you...and for doubting that it was you."

Spock slipped his arm round Kirk's shoulders and held him close. "It wasn't your fault," he murmured. "And as for doubting...I'd have been more concerned if you'd accepted without question that it was me. I've seen Flavius."

Kirk relaxed trustingly against his friend. "Meld with me," he whispered. It was the one sure way of making amends for his doubt, little though Spock appeared to worry about it.

"Not yet," Spock said. "Flavius - my double - is telepathically receptive; he has a personal stake in finding us. I put false memories into his mind - but he will have been told that 'he' was present at the interrogation, took you away..."

"Telepathically receptive? But Spock - when I saw him first I thought he was you, and tried to reach his mind. He was completely unresponsive."

"Possibly. He hates the ability - it marks him as different, and in a basically non-telepathic society he has always been feared for what he might read in others' unshielded minds. It also ensured that the only career possible for him was as a spy in the Romulan Security Force. Part of his job is to monitor the loyalty of the soldiers. He does it - and well - but while 'off the job' he prefers to keep his shields raised to shut out stray reception. I do the same, Jim, out of respect for others' privacy; he does it for his own sake - for his own sanity - otherwise the fear and hatred directed at him by those who know of his gift would destroy him."

Kirk was silent for a moment. "Poor Flavius."

"Yes."

They fell silent and lay still, listening intently. After a while Kirk, exhausted by the events of the last forty-eight hours, drifted into sleep despite the uncertainty of their situation. Spock was delighted to learn, then, that his friend's mental shields still held.

The Vulcan strained his ears for any sound that would indicate the search coming their way, but he could hear nothing. He was not fooled; the Romulans were undoubtedly searching under threat of dire punishment if they failed to capture the escaped Human and the man who had taken Flavius' place. Spock suspected that

Thula at least had realised who that man was, and, realising, had a double reason for wanting them recaptured. At the same time he doubted that she had confided in the others. Unless...Tal knew him too from the past. Spock had not had a high opinion of Tal's intelligence when he had encountered him aboard the Warbird, but the Romulan had a certain animal cunning that had clearly served him as well. Tal might also have put two and two together and come up with four. But Tal had a less personal grudge against him - them. Their actions had left him in command of the Warbird, at least temporarily. It was unlikely that he had been left in command, Spock felt. Indeed, he would not be here now if he had been given the command, for Starship Captaincy was one of the most prestigious positions available, to the Romulans as well as to the Federation.

Spock turned his thoughts to the more productive pursuit of considering their present position.

If the search reached the oasis their equipment would almost certainly be discovered, hidden though it was under the drooping leaves of a Shelter Cactus... or would it? They had not dared to assume that a search from the Starbase would miss the oasis, and they had camped there on the assumption that a search would pass that way. Perhaps...perhaps, after all, the Romulans, who did not dare linger too long in the open lest a routine Federation patrol discover them, would not find their camp.

Spock resolutely closed his mind to the problems that would arise if the Romulans did discover their camp. Even if they escaped recapture, the oasis was their rendezvous with McCoy and Scott, and they must return to it. Spock did not doubt that if the need arose, he could cover the fifty miles back to the Starbase on foot within three days; in more hospitable territory, he was confident that Jim could have walked it too. But in this desert waste, he was not sure that Jim could manage. It would not be for want of trying - Spock remembered all too well how Kirk had struggled on, fighting the handicap of a badly injured leg, as he attempted to cross the Denevan Valley of Truth - but the Human lacked the stamina to exist for three days in these waterless conditions, simply because he came from a planet where water was plentiful. And if their shelter at the oasis had been discovered, he could not leave Jim here alone, either. The Human needed the shelter and the moisture the oasis provided, or else...

No. He would not think of that.

Be positive. Be optimistic. Pessimism was bad. It could drain his will, could weaken him. He could not afford weakness - Jim needed his strength.

He still heard nothing, and cautiously opened his mental sensitivity, all the while maintaining strict shielding over his own thoughts.

He could sense nothing.

He frowned, slightly puzzled. Nothing?

But the alarm had been raised... The Romulans must be searching...

Of course. The buildings were shielded. They must be searching inside the old city first.

Dared he waken Kirk and try to reach the oasis before the search reached beyond the ruins and out to here? From one point of view it would be safer than waiting here until night; but there was no shelter in the mile between here and the oasis, nowhere they could hide if the Romulans expanded their search during the half hour it would take them to cover the ground.

The danger of capture by the Romulans...the danger from nocturnal predators, in particular the le-matya. Which was the greater?

Spock sighed. He could hope to defend Jim from the predators, which normally hunted singly; he could not hope to defend him from the Romulans.

They must wait.

Spock relaxed; keeping his mind shielded, he sank into a state of light

meditation in which he was still alert to detect any hostile thoughts.

Slowly, very slowly, the hours passed.

After a while, Spock became aware of the confused jumble of thoughts, and knew that the search had expanded into the desert. It was impossible to make out any one individual mind, but he did manage to detect a few stray individual thoughts.

Annoyance...anger that the men should lose their off-duty time for this search. Hmm. Their hearts were not wholly in the assignment, but if they captured the two fugitives they would show no mercy - rather, they would take the opportunity to vent their anger on their captives.

Mixed with the anger, some other thoughts. The soldiers did not particularly like their officers; they were amused that they had been tricked, as well as slightly puzzled - how had the trick been managed?

The thoughts came nearer, and Spock pressed closer into the shallow overhang that sheltered them, hardly daring to breathe.

A harsh Romulan voice spoke nearby, and for a moment Spock thought they had been discovered. Then the meaning of the guttural words penetrated.

"There's no shelter here. Besides, no-one would come into this hell-hole without transport. They'll have flown away ages ago. Let's get back to camp."

There was a rumble of agreement and the mental 'noise' diminished, ceasing abruptly after a short while.

Spock remained motionless. Some conscientious guard might still be watching from one of the rare windows in the outer wall, alert for any movement. Spock preferred to wait until dark, and risk encountering a le-matya.

What would the Romulans do now? he wondered. And what was his own duty now? Every instinct urged him to take Kirk away from here, back to his own universe where he was safe... He could say nothing, take the cure for McCoy, and return... But even as the thought crossed his mind two faces rose in his memory, McCoy and Scotty, loyal still to the Vulcan they served... How could he betray them? The Romulan presence on this Vulcan was a threat to their safety. And Jim - what would he think when he learned that his bondmate had abandoned the friends who had risked so much? Instinctively, he knew that the Human would not buy his safety at that price.

There was no other choice. He must report the presence of the Romulan base to Sendak - how to do it without being arrested again was the only problem. McCoy? Scott? No. He could not again involve his old friends. They held positions of importance - if it was discovered that they had helped an escaping deserter, Starfleet would be quick to charge them.

Jim, perhaps? But Jim's position was too ambivalent. He had no identity here, and Sendak was bound to want credentials Jim could not give.

No. Somehow Spock himself would have to give Sendak the information - his cousin would believe him. Which meant that he would again have to risk an entry to the Starbase, a base now doubly on the alert...

Kirk stirred. "Spock?"

"Yes, Jim?"

"I thought..." He shivered.

"You're safe now, Jim. The Romulans have abandoned the search, assuming that we had an aircar nearby. However, I think it more prudent to wait until dark before we return to the oasis."

Kirk nodded, willing to accept without question Spock's judgement in this. "McCoy? What if he came and..."

"I left a message. I can only hope that if he came, he found it."

They fell silent again, content that they were together, confident that now they were reunited nothing could defeat them. Slowly, the light began to fade.

At last Spock moved. "I think we can risk going on now," he murmured. Kirk rolled out of the cramped hollow after him and peered around.

"Spock, it's pitch dark," he protested.

"Fortunately, Vulcans have excellent night vision; the starlight is sufficient to let me see our way." Spock reached out and took Kirk's arm. "This way, Jim."

They moved steadily across the sand. Kirk's eyes kept being drawn to the sky where the constellations glittered frostily - it gave him something to look at; the darkness surrounding them reminded him too vividly of the hours he had spent in the darkness of the Romulan prison.

It was very cold, and Kirk began to wonder how badly Spock was suffering; it was taking all his self control to keep himself from shivering, and Spock was less tolerant of the cold than he. It was impossible to walk fast enough to keep warm.

Spock, in fact, barely felt the cold. His mind was so wholly occupied in trying to detect any nearby minds, either intelligent - Romulan - or not - le-matya - that he was almost oblivious to everything else except finding the way.

It took over half an hour to travel the mile to the oasis and a further ten minutes for Spock to find the Shelter Cactus where their equipment was stored. They groped their way into the inner 'cave' where Spock had left everything.

Here even Spock's excellent night vision was useless for there was not even the brilliant starlight to provide any illumination. They felt around them blindly.

Kirk had just found one of their sleeping bags when from a little way away sounded the raucous, shrieking howl of a hunting le-matya. Both men stiffened in the automatic fear reaction that was the main purpose of the cry, giving the creature a few valuable seconds to leap onto the faster, more agile wild warrak that were its main prey.

Kirk relaxed after a moment, confident that the carnivore would not come under the fleshy leaves of the Shelter Cactus - he knew enough about le-matyas to know that these most feared beasts were themselves terrified by having anything above their heads - a reaction akin to one Kirk had seen in some species including domesticated animals that were always kept out of doors and panicked if taken into stable, barn or byre.

Then he realised that Spock was shaking uncontrollably - a combination of cold and discovering how close they were to a le-matya, he guessed, if his own pounding heart and frozen hands and feet were any guide.

"I've found one of the sleeping bag," he said. "You get into it, Spock - you're colder than I am. It won't take me long to find the other one."

Spock made no protest. Reaction had indeed set in, and he felt very tired. He let Kirk pull his boots off and help him into the sleeping bag, and lay unable to control his steady shivering while Kirk searched around for the other bag.

It took him only a few seconds to find it. He kicked his own boots off and wriggled into the second bag, then rolled over to lie pressing close against Spock. The Vulcan hesitated for a moment, then slipped an arm around Kirk.

"Keep me warm," he murmured.

Kirk wrapped his arms around his bondmate. Slowly both men began to feel warm again.

In the morning they went cautiously around the oasis, finding nothing to indicate either that the Romulans had searched this far, or that McCoy had been. Spock's message to the doctor was still as he had left it. There was no sign of movement over by the ruined city either; they watched for some time before moving back to their camp.

"Could they have moved out?" Kirk asked doubtfully.

"I don't know," Spock said. "In their position... In their position, I'd move. Not necessarily far, but I'd move before my presence was reported and the authorities came looking for me. But the Romulans aren't encouraged to think for themselves; the Praetor has always discouraged initiative in his troops. And it's always possible that they'll assume that nobody on Vulcan would believe a Human who told such an unlikely story..."

"How would they explain you away? Someone so like one of their own men that they were all fooled?"

"I put into Flavius' mind the thought that he'd been taken ill. They might think that he'd done it in a fever."

Kirk looked doubtful. "I don't think we can assume they're that stupid."

"Neither do I," Spock admitted. "Seriously, Jim, I'd expect them to move, though they can't leave the planet until a ship comes for them. They couldn't keep one in orbit, even one masked by their cloaking device."

"Cloaking device?"

"In this universe, the Romulans developed an invisibility screen for their ships. We had to capture one... We encountered Thula and Tal then, and outwitted them - brought a cloaking device back. Thula was disgraced, of course..."

"Thula?"

"The woman you met. She undoubtedly recognised you, Jim - though your youth must have puzzled her."

Kirk nodded. It explained quite a lot. Spock went on, "We must find a way to report the Romulan presence."

"Yes, of course." Kirk's smile as their eyes met told the Vulcan that his bondmate understood his dilemma, and agreed with his conclusion. Their minds touched briefly, and Spock acknowledged yet again how much he valued the development of his latent powers - to have this rapport with his companion, this instant understanding with no need of words, gave him a satisfaction he knew he would never be able to take for granted.

Remaining concealed under the Shelter Cactus they settled down to wait for McCoy.

It was almost twenty-four hours before anyone arrived.

The aircar came down lightly at the edge of the oasis furthest from the ruins. The two fugitives watched cautiously as Scotty jumped out and strode into the oasis, looking round searchingly.

Kirk and Spock looked at each other, both instantly concerned, and ducked into the open.

"Ah, there ye are," Scotty greeted them cheerfully, and one worry was dispelled. "McCoy thocht it'd be better if I cam' tae get ye. We werena' sure that he wis bein' watched, ye ken, bit Sendak wis gi'en him a few odd looks as if he was beginnin' tae wonder a bittockie..."

"It was probably wiser," Spock agreed, not completely sure what Scotty meant but getting the gist of it. "We would not want to cause trouble for McCoy - or for you."

"I've tae tak' ye tae his hoose," Scotty went on. "He said he'd still tae get somethin' for ye, but he thocht he'd be able tae get it by nicht."

"Will it be safe for him?" Spock asked. "Surely strangers in his house..."

"He gets plenty o' visitors. If onybody sees ye', ye're patients. He disna' see that mony, so he can fit in a couple extra easily enough. Whaur's yer kit?"

"Under here." Kirk ducked back under the Shelter Cactus and came out with the two sleeping bags and the box of other food and equipment. They fitted it into the back seat, Kirk and Spock squeezing in as well, while Scotty took off.

He flew the aircar with the consummate skill that both men knew so well from their different pasts. His passengers crouched down as the aircar reached the more populated area near the spaceport, and remained crouching as Scotty landed neatly in the grounds of McCoy's house.

Scotty looked around carefully. "Nobody about," he said softly. "Come."

They ran for the house.

It was empty. Scotty looked at them. "Hungry?"

Spock shook his head. Kirk hesitated for a moment, then said shyly, "I'm not hungry, but I wouldn't say no to some coffee."

"Aye." Scotty vanished, to return in a couple of minutes carrying a tray with three cups of coffee. They were just finishing when the door opened and McCoy came in.

"Good, you're here. I managed to get your little box, Spock, but I hope Sendak doesn't go looking for it again for a few days."

Spock murmured his thanks.

"Will you go straight back?" McCoy asked. There was a faintly wistful note in his voice.

"We can't - it is vitally necessary that I see Sendak before we go." Concisely, Spock explained the situation, finishing, "Sendak knows me well enough to at least believe what I tell him - and it will serve to convince him that although I could not explain, I did not violate my oath."

"How do you propose to get in?" McCoy hesitated, then added, "I'll help if I can, of course, but the route we took last time is closed - Sendak has a guard on it now. And everyone is having to show a pass these days, even when he's known - even me, even the Commodore himself."

Kirk and Spock looked at each other, and the Human chuckled. "If only they knew..."

"As I remember the base," Spock said slowly, "the records building and some of the routine computer rooms overlooked the desert."

"They still do," McCoy assured him. "There hasn't been any expansion on that side."

"That part of the base was never patrolled as fully as the rest," Scotty remembered.

"Correct, Mr. Scott. The Vulcan Starbase was always considered the most secure - no Vulcan would betray his world, his trust, his beliefs; and the desert was considered sufficient safeguard against any potential traitor from offworld."

"You think you could get in from there?" McCoy asked.

"It would appear to be our one possible means of entry," Spock agreed. "The Spaceport entrance was always well-guarded, as was the Main Gate...most of the rest of the base was subject to patrol, several times a week. If we choose our moment, on a day when a patrol is not due, we should be able to gain entry from the desert side. There is this, too, in our favour - the sentries are Vulcans, conscientious but unimaginative. It would not be logical for us, having

gone to so much trouble to escape from the base, to return to it. Jim, will you come with me? I may need you."

"Of course."

McCoy and Scotty exchanged glances. "What can we do to help?" the doctor asked.

"It would perhaps be best if neither of you was involved again," the Vulcan said thoughtfully. "So far you have avoided direct suspicion, but..."

"Look, we want tae help." Scotty leaned forward, emphasising his words. "Ye've worked out how tae get intae the base - but ye've still tae get oot."

"That is where I will need Jim. During my interrogation I was in Sendak's office several times, and observed his routine - I do not think he will have changed it. I will go to his office and see him, while Jim - somehow - must gain control of his aircar, which is always waiting nearby. When I have spoken with Sendak, I will stun him and leave - we should have time to leave the base before the alarm is raised, as the guards will recognise the Commodore's car."

"Then what?" McCoy demanded.

"We will abandon the car, and return to our own universe."

"Look, you can be pretty sure that the alarm will be raised fast - the car might be traced before you can do that. Better if we rendezvous somewhere, leave the car, and I take you...back to the oasis, say. That will give you a breathing space if you have any difficulty."

"Good thinking, Leonard," Scotty agreed. "You meet them - you ken Vulcan better than I do anyway - and I'll stay on the base, set up an alibi for us. I'll hae a word wi' that assistant o' yours - he's a bright lad, and if we both swear blind you were wi' us..."

"That's it settled," McCoy said triumphantly.

"I can only say, thank you, my friends," Spock said quietly. "McCoy, you said you had the return mechanism?"

"Here." McCoy handed over the small box. "I took everything I could see, but as you feared, it's in pieces."

Spock examined the delicate mechanism, then looked up. "Several components are missing," he said. "However, if you can obtain the other from the cellar, I am certain I can repair it."

"Leave it to me," McCoy grinned confidently. "I know Sendak will be busy this afternoon - I can get into the cellar easily. Scotty, you fly Spock and Jim to the base, and fix the rendezvous with them. I know Sendak has no appointments for the next couple of days, Spock - you should find him in his office when you're ready, or at least he won't be far away. Get going now - I'll see you later."

Scotty landed his aircar behind the rocks a mile or so from the starbase. For a moment or so they lingered, making sure that both Spock and Scotty knew the co-ordinates for the rendezvous where McCoy would meet them, then the engineer sighed reluctantly.

"Ah'd best be off," he said quietly, "or Ah'll no' be able tae let ye go at all. Spock - the best o' luck tae ye - and dinna tell me 'luck is not logical'."

"I would not dream of it, Mr. Scott. Your appearance here when we had such need of you has almost convinced me of the existence of that curious phenomenon."

"At least Ah lived tae hear that!" Scotty turned to Kirk, his face softening. "Jim - remember whit Ah told ye. Be happy, lad."

"Thank you, Scotty." Kirk looked at him steadily for a moment, then threw his arms around the older man and hugged him. "Goodbye - and thank you. Don't forget me."

"Nae chance o' that." Scotty returned the hug for a moment, then pulled away and swung himself back into the aircar; with a final wave he was gone.

Kirk and Spock watched the car out of sight, then Spock turned to his companion.

"Come, Jim - we have much still to do."

At first, Kirk and Spock thought they would have difficulty getting into the starbase. The old-fashioned wall that surrounded it was designed more to keep out marauding predators than trespassing humanoids, but even so it was clear that any attempt to climb over it would be detected very rapidly. They moved cautiously around it, remaining a little distance from the wall, studying it.

About a third of the way round, Kirk caught Spock's arm. "Look!"

"I do not see anything untoward."

"That mound of earth - something's been digging there."

Spock studied the small mound for some moments before replying. "You could be correct. Let's check it."

Something had indeed burrowed under the wall, and fairly recently too, or the hole would have been discovered in the routine check of the outside of the wall, carried out - as Spock remembered - every three days. The hole was not large, but, Spock estimated, large enough. But was the wild sehlat - smaller than his domesticated cousin and dangerously vicious - still near?

"I'll go first," he said quietly.

"No, Spock," Kirk said. "I'll go. If there are sentries in sight inside, I'm not in danger of being arrested for desertion - 'my' death in this universe is well established."

"True - but I forbid it, Jim. The creature that dug this hole may be near - I know how to combat it, you do not."

"You forbid me?" Kirk was startled, and slightly annoyed.

"As your Captain, yes. No arguments, Jim." Spock waited a second, then turned and dropped to the ground, vanishing into the tunnel; a year later his voice came through, sounding faintly hollow. "All right - come through, Jim."

Kirk knew a moment of near panic as he committed himself to the tunnel. What if it was not wide enough? Spock, after all, was thinner than he... But he wriggled through safely and joined the equally earth-stained Vulcan on the other side.

The tunnel could have been dug to meet their specific requirements.

They were hidden from the main courtyard of the starbase by the long, low building that Spock remembered housed much of the communications equipment. This outer wall, facing the south as it did, was windowless to give the often delicate machinery inside some added protection from Vulcan's fiery heat. The main building that they sought was relatively near, and the communications building would shield them for most of their short journey to it. But even so Kirk felt peculiarly naked as they went quickly along to the end of the building nearest their destination.

"The simplest method would be to walk straight in," Spock murmured. "Unfortunately, as I have already discovered, my face is still too well-known here for that to be possible."

"A Human is as conspicuous," Kirk agreed.

"We must wait until dark," Spock decided. "Once the day shift has gone off

duty, the place will be half deserted. It should then be possible to reach Sendak's office unseen."

Kirk nodded. "It was getting late when I got here - there weren't too many people about." He still found it difficult to accept how easy it had been to leave the base.

They sank down to lie half-hidden by the tufty vegetation that here, in this seldom-considered strip of ground, had managed to gain a foothold. By mutual consent they remained silent, both aware that anyone passing by who happened to hear voices might well decide to investigate. They were so close to safety now - indeed, had it not been for the Romulans they could have remained safely in McCoy's house until he brought Spock the missing components. For a moment Spock wondered if he should simply have tried to reach the cellar himself after warning Sendak, but he knew that it would be safer to put as much distance as possible between himself and the base as quickly as possible. If he was not known to have left the base, the place would be pulled to pieces - metaphorically speaking - in the search for him. Under those circumstances, the cellar would not remain undiscovered long enough for him to repair the return mechanism.

Although there was still so much they wanted to say to each other, there would be plenty of time for that later - provided Masters had managed to cover up for them satisfactorily. And for each of them, there was unbounded reassurance in the silent presence of the other. No, speech was not necessary just then.

It was very hot.

Fortunately, they were shielded from the direct rays of the sun by the wall, but even in the shadow the ground soaked in the scorching heat of the air. Heat reflected from the walls of the communications building too, and even the shaded outer wall on which the sun never shone directly was warm to the touch.

It had not been so hot at the oasis.

But at the oasis the shade was provided by living plants which it seemed could absorb the heat. At the oasis there had been water...

Remembrance of the water made Kirk feel thirsty, but there was nothing he could do about it. Fortunately his metabolism seemed to require less liquid than many Humans' often did. He would undoubtedly be suffering from dehydration before night, but not so badly, he thought, as to handicap him. He licked salt from his lips where sweat had dried.

Spock also was well aware of the dangers of dehydration his Human companion faced, but took comfort from the realisation that Kirk did not yet seem distressed. Spock himself was in no discomfort yet, but knew he would be glad when night fell. The evening chill would refresh both of them, although Jim must be given liquid as soon as any was available - and salt. They should have timed their arrival for late afternoon, instead of so early in the day.

Time passed slowly, but neither man was bored. Both had much to think about, and each drew comfort from the occasional encouraging glance they exchanged. Spock extended his hand, after a while, silently asking permission to touch Kirk's mind, and the Human nodded consent; they took advantage of their private means of communication to finalise the details of the delicately-timed plan they had improvised. The bond-link would serve them well in this venture, for they might need contact urgently in a situation where no communicators were available, and they could not risk using them if they had been.

The patch of shade shrank as the sun travelled towards the west; although it was sinking lower in the sky, it was still high enough for its direct rays to strike them for a little while, then the building provided a growing shadow. And the sky began to darken.

With the twilight came the cold. Spock shivered.

"Dare we move yet?" Kirk breathed.

"Half an hour," Spock replied as softly. "The night security staff will have completed their first round by then, and will be reporting."

For the first time that day, the minutes dragged. Finally Spock murmured, "Come."

They moved cautiously round the end of the communications building. Ahead lay the Administration Centre, the courtyard before it deserted; Sendak's aircar stood in readiness a few yards from the door. As they had hoped, it was unattended.

For an instant they touched hands, each asking and giving reassurance; then they moved quickly forwards, Kirk heading for the aircar, Spock for the entrance to the administration building.

Commodore Sendak was a sorely-perplexed man as he made his way back to his office after the short break he had allowed himself for his evening meal. Spock's mysterious appearances and disappearances were rapidly taking on all the qualities of a nightmare. Even now he found it difficult to believe Spock a traitor...yet what other explanation could there be?

Although he had refused to give any account of his whereabouts during the last few years, he had firmly denied that he had betrayed either Vulcan or the Federation, and illogical though it was, Sendak was inclined to believe him. Not that his belief would interfere with his duty, of course...

Meanwhile, where was the man? All ships leaving Vulcan since his escape had been thoroughly searched - he had not left the planet. Without help, he could not have got far... Perhaps he should question McCoy again, privately - the two men had served together years ago, and it was just possible that misguided loyalty to a former commander had persuaded the doctor to forget his Starfleet oath. Scarcely likely, though - a Vulcan would be unlikely to have inspired so much loyalty in a Human, and besides, a discreet watch had been kept on the doctor since the escape, and he had made no suspicious moves. An equally discreet investigation of Spock's former associates had begun, but it would take time since Starfleet had no wish to cause a scandal; all he could do was wait...

Absorbed in the problem, Sendak pressed the door release and stepped into his office, only to freeze as a firm hand clamped down between his neck and shoulder.

"I advise you not to struggle, Sendak - I have no wish to cause you harm."

Deliberately, Sendak relaxed tensed muscles - it was illogical to struggle when he knew he could not escape that relentless grip.

"Why have you returned?" he asked at last.

"Because I owe a duty to Vulcan, and to Starfleet. I ask for your word that you will not raise the alarm until you have heard what I have to say. In return, I give you my word that I will do nothing you would count as treachery."

Sendak considered for a moment. "You have my word," he said at last.

"Thank you." The hold relaxed, and Sendak turned to meet Spock's expressionless eyes.

"Well, what do you wish to say to me?"

"In the ruined city of Sas-a-Shar is a Romulan base." Spock briefly gave the facts as he had learned them, saying nothing of Kirk's involvement. "I was unable to learn their purpose," he ended, "but whatever their intentions, a Romulan base on Vulcan can only be dangerous."

There was no question in Sendak's mind that Spock was lying - there was no reason for inventing such an easily disproved charge. "If they know themselves discovered, surely they will withdraw?"

"I think not. A Romulan ship equipped with a cloaking device might be able

to elude detection for a short time, but one remaining in orbit would soon be detected. It is my belief that they have summoned a ship to evacuate the base -- and in the meantime have retreated deeper into the ruins. They may have hoped my report would not be believed. You must find them, Sendak, for the safety of Vulcan."

"I will do so," Sendak promised. "Cousin -- this act of yours confirms my belief that you are no traitor. Will you not explain?"

"I cannot, Sendak." Spock shook his head regretfully. "The only thing I can tell you is that in my new life I serve Vulcan and Starfleet still. Soon, I will return to...where I have been, and you will never see me again."

"It is, of course, my duty to prevent your escape," Sendak pointed out calmly.

"Of course -- as it is mine to succeed." Spock reached out and touched his cousin's face lightly. "Sendak, you will walk with me to your aircar, which I must borrow for a time. You will then return here and give orders for the search for the Romulan base. It will be impossible for you to take any action against me for one hour. Come, let us go."

To his utter astonishment, Sendak found himself turning to follow his cousin into the corridor. His body refused to obey the commands of his brain -- it was unprecedented! There was nothing he could do but obey.

Spock had established the control reluctantly, and held it as lightly as he dared. During his training he had absorbed something of Commander Spock's distaste for an enforced link, but for Kirk's sake he would do much more than this. He was surprised, though, at the strength of Sendak's resistance -- truly remarkable for a non-telepath. Part of his mind filed the information away for consideration at a later date -- partial confirmation of his tentative theory that the Vulcans of his world had indeed been telepathic once, but had lost the ability.

A patrolling guard glanced across, registered the presence of Commodore Sendak, and continued on his way; Spock raised a hand.

"I leave you here," he said quietly. "I am pleased, cousin, that while you do not know the full story, you at least know that I am not a traitor."

"The name of our house is untarnished, Spock." Sendak inclined his head. "Since I find myself unable to prevent your departure, go in peace. Live long and prosper."

"Live long, Sendak." Without a backward glance Spock turned towards the waiting aircar.

It was lucky that the controls of this aircar were so similar to those of a shuttlecraft, Kirk reflected as he waited, listening intently to the gentle purring of the engine as it warmed up, smiling wryly at the irony of 'warming up' an engine in this furnace. Was it his imagination, or was this Vulcan really hotter than the other one? But they dared leave nothing to chance. No matter how they justified it, Spock was a deserter from the Starfleet of this universe -- strange that the realisation had never dawned on either of them before this -- even though he was still serving Starfleet in a different one; and indeed he was probably of more value in his adopted universe, Kirk thought, for not only was he a better commanding officer than the Captain had been -- and he had been excellent -- he had helped Kirk to become a much better officer too. In addition, without his knowledge of this universe, Bones would have no chance of living...automatically Kirk checked that the precious tape this McCoy had given him was safe.

Movement...

Two figures appeared in the doorway; Spock and Sendak. Kirk still found it difficult to reconcile what he had been told of this man with the one he knew in his own universe -- and yet, were they so very different? The one, motivated by hatred, the other by duty. Either one of them was no friend to Spock.

The two men were talking quietly; then Spock turned and began to walk towards the aircar.

Watching his bondmate, Kirk caught the flicker of movement in the corner of his eye; Sendak was reaching for the alarm beside the door, albeit slowly, as if he was fighting to complete the motion.

//Spock!//

Kirk's warning cry through the bond carried with it the precise danger with a speed that words could not have managed. Spock whirled, raised a hand to his cousin's shoulder and pressed, then caught Sendak as he slumped and lowered him gently to the ground.

//A dangerous miscalculation!// Spock flashed the thought as he ran for the aircar. //I had hoped to buy us a little more time, but he threw off my control...//

//Never mind that - just hurry!// Kirk threw the door open, and Spock scrambled in. As he sank into the passenger seat, Kirk noticed Sendak beginning to stir, to sit up, and knew that there was no time to lose. He released the brakes and applied power, lifting the little craft barely clear of the ground. It would take precise piloting, but he did not think there was time to waste in gaining height.

It was almost too easy.

The aircar flashed past the unprepared guard at the exit; it took the man a moment to realise that the Base Commander was not in it, but was running - running! - after it. Illogical!

It seemed that Sendak thought so too, for he slowed to a brisk walk as the aircar, still flying too near the ground for safety, disappeared behind a cluster of rocks; its soft purr swiftly faded into silence.

Sendak stopped beside the guard, who glanced at him uneasily. "I apologise, sir. I did not realise..."

"No, of course you did not," Sendak answered shortly. "Who would expect my aircar to be stolen - borrowed," he corrected himself, remembering his cousin's words. Who had the other been, he wondered - the unseen man who had piloted the 'borrowed' craft. Spock must have great faith in his skill.

"Shall I organise pursuit, sir?" the guard continued.

"Yes," Sendak murmured. "Although I would doubt..."

"Sir?"

"Nothing. Wait, we cannot pursue them yet - there is another matter..." First, the Romulan base must be investigated; another man might have contrived that story to delay pursuit, but one thing Sendak knew for certain - Spock had not been lying. "Call the guard commander."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk was still flying bare feet above the ground when he approached the pre-arranged rendezvous with McCoy. The surgeon's aircar was there, resting on a ledge of solid rock, and Kirk smiled slightly; there would be nothing to indicate that they had flown from here in another vehicle. He brought Sendak's aircar down neatly beside McCoy's.

The surgeon was grinning as he jumped down from his own vehicle. He moved to its rear and opened the back door.

"Help me with this," he asked.

'This' was a cloth-wrapped object. McCoy pulled the ends of the cloth open and Kirk swallowed.

He was looking at something he had hoped never to see again - the Captain's body.

Agonised, he met the surgeon's eyes, afraid to face the accusation he knew must be there - McCoy must be aware that this man had not died a natural death. He was aware that Spock had moved to his side, and was grateful for the implied support, but to his astonishment the still-blue eyes were gentle.

"Whatever it was, it doesn't matter," McCoy said quietly.

They helped McCoy to lift the body into Sendak's aircar, settling it in the pilot's seat; McCoy dropped the little knife onto the floor, and it was not until then that Kirk realised that McCoy was wearing gloves. Kirk took one last look at the body, and saw then that McCoy had also obtained a Captain's shirt from somewhere and put it on the dead man.

"That should confuse things nicely," McCoy grunted. He glanced round, checking the ground, then nodded. "Okay - get in."

They obeyed. This was a larger vehicle than Sendak's, and there was plenty of room for them both. McCoy took off.

He also stayed close to the ground, but his speed was much less than Kirk's had been; despite that, Spock seemed more tense than he had been in the Commodore's car.

They landed once more at the oasis. "Seemed the best place," McCoy grunted. "You'll have water and shelter at least while you fix that gadget of yours. Just remember that you told Sendak about the Romulan base over at the ruins. Don't let yourself be seen."

Spock looked at McCoy and half smiled. "Yes, it is a good choice," he said quietly. "And Doctor - your piloting skill has improved."

McCoy grinned back. "I'm planet-based now, remember," he replied. "I'm in practice. On the Enterprise, what chance did I ever get to pilot anything?"

"True."

They climbed out of the aircar, but McCoy left the engine running. "I won't hang about," he said quietly. "Scotty is holding the fort, but the sooner I get back and establish my alibi, the better."

Kirk nodded. Time was passing too swiftly, and every day lessened his McCoy's chances of recovery - and increased their chances of having been found out - although it might prove difficult for any Court of Enquiry to establish that they had disappeared for some time, since they were on the Enterprise when it left the Starbase and no shuttlecraft had been in use...so how could they have got off the ship?

"Of course," Spock answered McCoy. "You and Mr. Scott must guard yourselves." He hesitated. "McCoy - three years ago...do you think I did the right thing? The charge against me...it was justified... I did desert, although it never occurred to me until I was arrested that I had."

"You did what you had to do," McCoy answered instantly. "You continued to serve a Starfleet which was making better use of your abilities than this one did, the last few years. I don't call that desertion." He looked at Kirk. "I do understand, Spock; if I had been in your shoes that day, I would have done exactly what you did. I envy you...having Jim again."

"Though you may never see us again," Spock said quietly, "remember - in another universe we are alive and well...and even across time and space, you are our friend."

It was time. They shook McCoy's hand - long, firm handclasps that comforted him in the sudden loneliness that threatened to overwhelm him.

He managed to find a smile. "Good luck, both of you."

"Thanks, Bones - for everything," Kirk said quietly.

Spock simply murmured, "Peace, my friend." Then they were gone, swallowed up by the spreading branches of the Shelter Cactus as they turned on the last lap of their way back to the other universe, Spock carefully carrying two bags - one containing the incomplete mechanism, the other, the pieces of the one McCoy had retrieved from the cellar.

McCoy remained there for a moment, then, as everything remained quiet, he took off and, maintaining a low altitude, headed back towards the Starbase. He hoped fervently that Scotty had a bottle of his favourite beverage in his luggage - several bottles. Tonight, it would be a good idea to get drunk.

Kirk watched nervously as Spock worked on the mechanism of the little box that was their return ticket to safety. He no longer feared capture; he was confident that, given time, Spock would solve the problem of their return.

But time was the one thing they did not have in abundance. Or rather, it was what Dr. Leonard McCoy, suffering from xenopolycythemia in the other universe, did not have. And the longer their return was delayed, the greater the chance that Starfleet would discover they were missing - and then they would be caught in a trap; the same trap that had enmeshed Spock here. The ability to cross the barriers between universes, deliberately, was potentially far too dangerous for the knowledge of how it was done to be revealed.

Well, they would cross that bridge when - if - they came to it.

The Vulcan worked steadily, refusing to admit even to himself how tired he was getting. He had been living under considerable strain for many days; his concentration had several times been stretched to the utmost; and now this delicate job, which not even Kirk, trained scientist though he was, could help him with, was demanding a degree of care and attention of which he was barely capable. His fingers slipped, and a tiny component fell. He stared blankly downwards, aware of what had happened, his mind suddenly refusing to co-operate.

Kirk was on his knees beside his friend in a moment, head bent, eyes seeking.

"What fell?" he asked, not knowing just what he was looking for.

"The screw that makes the final connection," Spock replied, his voice dead. "Without it...the mechanism will not operate...and it is very small."

He made to join Kirk, but the Human stopped him. "No - don't move. If you move you might stand on it, tip some sand over it..."

Spock accepted the logic of Kirk's words, and remained stationary, frantically worried and trying not to show it, not to trouble his friend; and he was, in addition, grateful for the momentary rest.

Kirk carefully avoided touching the soft dry sand as he searched, eyes straining, for the tiny component. Such a little thing... His eyes had covered the entire area in front of Spock, in vain. It had to be there... He began to look again.

Ah...there... A tiny dimple in the otherwise smooth sand. He bent closer.

Yes. Something flashed in the sunlight. Kirk carefully scooped up a handful of sand, let it trickle slowly, slowly, through his fingers. For a moment he thought he had been mistaken, that whatever had flashed had been simply a grain of shining stuff in the sand, and then the tiny head of the screw came into clear sight.

Spock forgot restraint and breathed a single sigh of pure and unashamed relief. Very carefully, Kirk brushed the screw clear of sand, glad that everything was so dry - even a trace of moisture could make a single grain stick - and that might be enough to throw them hopelessly astray, materialise them someplace

from where they could never find their way home. Even his skin was completely dry, the sweat all evaporated by the merciless heat.

Spock reached out for the screw. His hand was trembling uncontrollably, and he drew back.

"Rest a minute," Kirk murmured. "I know we want to get home as quickly as possible now, but another minute won't make that much difference."

"No," Spock agreed. "Another minute...won't make that much difference."

He closed his eyes, breathing deeply, concentrating on a basic relaxing exercise. For a moment he thought that it was going to fail, then tense muscles loosened. He opened his eyes.

"I am all right now," he said quietly, and took the screw. Surely, this time, he fitted it into place, tightening it quickly. "Ready."

Kirk stood. "How does it work for two?"

"Put your arms round me."

Kirk obeyed, feeling Spock's arms tighten around his shoulders.

Nothing happened.

Spock tried again. Nothing.

"What's wrong?" Kirk asked anxiously.

"I don't know. I must have missed connecting one of the damaged links." Spock looked at the unit, an almost defeated droop to his shoulders.

"Rest for a while," Kirk advised. "You know how tired you are. You'll get on faster in the long run if you take a break now."

"You're right, of course." Spock glanced at the sky. "But it will soon be too dark to see to do such delicate work. If I stop now, I won't be able to do anything more until morning."

"Then we'll just have to wait till morning," Kirk replied firmly.

Spock put the unit ~~carefully~~ into the cave of the Shelter Cactus that had been half hiding them and lay back, relaxing. Kirk watched him for some minutes, then moved off to gather some of the barely edible succulent that was known as the Survival Plant. The only one of Vulcan's ~~edible~~ desert plants that could be harvested without risk of possible serious injury from sharp, often barbed needles, and often growing far from surface water, it provided a source of liquid for desert-bound travellers; when found at an oasis, it produced a spongy pulp that staved off the worst hunger pangs. Away from an oasis, the pulp was so ~~sparse~~ that it was barely worth harvesting, and only the liquid reservoir ~~was~~ worth tapping.

The thought of eating the slightly bitter flesh did not appeal, but he had not expected it to; his system had not yet recovered from the abuse he had suffered while he was held prisoner. He snapped off complete leaves from several plants, careful not to harvest plants growing too close together, and ignoring the sap chamber which they did not need. Within a very short time the leaf scars would dry, and it would be almost impossible to tell just when the leaves had been broken off.

At length he returned to where Spock lay and sank down beside him. "How do you feel?"

"Tired," Spock admitted. "And you?"

"Tired," Kirk agreed. It was not the best description for his drained feeling, but it would serve. He glanced up at the sun. It was still several degrees above the horizon - why, then, was he feeling shivery? "Let's have something to eat, then find a shelter for the night."



They ate the juicy leaves quickly, then crawled into the dark inner chamber of the Shelter Cactus. Since they had no blankets they huddled together for warmth, and soon fell asleep.

Despite the urgency of locating the Romulan base in Sas-a-Shar, routine security patrols were not relaxed - and to these patrols had gone the order to find Commodore Sendak's aircar at all costs, and to detain its passengers.

Sooner than might have been expected, a patrol returning from their assigned survey just as it was getting dark reported that they believed they had located the missing aircar landed on the rock of a sizeable lava flow, and that they intended to land and investigate.

The three Vulcans approached the car cautiously, wondering at the absolute immobility of the figure in the pilot's seat.

Sandor jerked the door open, stunner raised. "Out!" he snapped. The pilot did not move.

Sandor reached forward to grasp the man's shoulder. "It is not..." he began, and stopped, startled by the utter rigidity of the shoulder under his hand. There was a dark stain on the side of the pilot's neck that looked like dried blood, too... Sandor leaned closer, peering in the half light, and caught his breath.

"Better call the Security Chief," he said at last. "This man is dead."

Kirk woke an hour or two later to discover that he was shivering. The night seemed excessively cold. He would have moved away from Spock to keep from disturbing him; only the realisation that if he did they would both feel the cold more kept him from doing so.

"Jim?" Spock's voice was very soft.

"Cold, isn't it?" he answered.

They huddled closer, unable to get back to sleep, exhausted and miserable. In addition to the cold Kirk was beginning to feel physically uncomfortable. It hurt slightly when he breathed, but he guessed that all that was wrong was that his muscles were protesting at being held tightly against the cold. Academically he knew that he would be better to relax, but he found himself completely unable to do so. Even Spock's higher body heat didn't seem to be helping him much.

Slowly the night passed, and the first grey light of dawn gleamed faintly under the edge of the drooping shelter leaves. They crawled out, to discover that the ground outside was white.

"Frost?" Kirk said blankly.

"It can happen," Spock replied. "The night-time temperature is lower than that of the day, of course, but it rarely drops to freezing. It was...unfortunate ...that last night was one of the nights when it did. However, the sun will soon warm us."

Sure enough, the slanting rays of the rising sun were beginning to melt the hoar frost. Spock rubbed his hands briskly together.

"As soon as I am a little warmer I will begin work on the return mechanism."

Kirk nodded. His chest was increasingly tight, and he could only hope that as the sun warmed the air he would feel better. He was determined not to betray his weakness to Spock, however - the Vulcan had enough to worry about.

Commodore Sendak was quietly pleased with the results of the investigation of the ruins of Sas-a-Shar. As Spock had predicted, the Romulans had retired deep into the winding passages of the city, but the Security forces, proceeding slowly and methodically, were gradually cutting off their retreat - it was simply a matter of time until the last of them were captured.

Starn, the Security Chief, had reported the discovery of the missing aircar, and the death of its pilot; he had mentioned only one body, though - was it Spock's, or that of his unidentified accomplice? Motivated by a curiosity he would not have admitted, Sendak flew out to the grounded aircar to see for himself.

It was early morning. Starn came to meet him, and Sendak was instantly struck by the Security Chief's tense attitude. Did Starn expect him to be so upset by the death of a cousin - one, moreover who, whatever his motives, had deserted his post for three full years?

"Sir...the pilot of the aircar...Commodore Spock..."

"Is dead. Yes, I was informed."

"Sir - did you not receive Dr. S'ela's report?"

"No."

"He estimates that Commodore Spock has been dead for fully three years."

"What!"

"Killed by a knife wound to the neck. The knife is there as well, sir. But..."

"But?"

"I tested the knife and the aircar for fingerprints, eliminating yours and those of your regular pilot. I found those of the dead man in the aircar...and the prints of another man, mostly on the knife and the controls. The fingerprints have been identified as those of a Human, James Kirk."

The name seemed vaguely familiar. "Has this James Kirk been traced?"

Starn swallowed, clearly shaken. "Sir - James Kirk died...almost twenty years ago."

It was nearly midday before Spock raised his head from the mechanism. "I think it is now operating," he said.

Kirk put his arms around the Vulcan again. Spock's arms tightened around his shoulders. He felt a movement, then everything shimmered... He closed his eyes against the sudden dizziness...

...Chill air struck him, and he opened his eyes quickly, sure that something had gone wrong, that they had transferred to a world of snow and ice...to find himself in the equipment-filled cabin he had left...a century ago.

"We're home," he whispered. "But why is it so cold?"

Spock smiled. "Only by comparison."

"But you always have the heating turned up."

"Yes, but not as high as Vulcan norm, or I would find the temperature in the rest of the ship uncomfortably low; I keep it low enough so that I remain to some degree acclimatised to Human temperature requirements. But remember - we've been in the Sas-a-Shar Desert, where it is even hotter than Vulcan norm. Your own cabin will seem even colder than this until you adjust. But it's interesting, Jim - the other Vulcan does seem warmer than ours. I never realised it before."

Kirk checked once more for the tape the other McCoy had given him. "Let's get this to Bones right away."

"No, wait, Jim. We can't just suddenly walk out of here after being off duty for so long. What story has Miss Masters told to account for our absence? We must speak to her first."

Kirk nodded. "Yes, of course." Stifling a sudden urge to cough he began to cross to the intercom. He never reached it.

Spock moved with breathless haste as his bondmate collapsed, the link telling him that the Human was - at best - only semi-conscious.

The heat in Kirk's skin startled and horrified him - Kirk felt almost as warm as a Vulcan, instead of being several degrees cooler.

Spock turned to the intercom. As he reached for it he hesitated - what tale had Masters told? - then he pressed the switch; he dared not delay.

"Spock to sickbay."

"M'Benga here."

"Where is Dr. McCoy?"

"In his cabin, Captain. He was unwell - I persuaded him to rest. Shall I call....?"

"No. Come to my quarters immediately. Mr. Kirk has a high fever."

"On my way, sir."

In fact it was Charlene Masters who reached Spock's cabin first, called - she afterwards told him - by Tamura, whose help she had in part enlisted.

"Were you successful?" she asked as she entered.

"Yes," said Spock. "But J...Mr. Kirk..."

She suddenly realised that Kirk was lying limp on Spock's bed. "What's wrong with him?"

The door slid open and Dr. M'Benga entered, Nurse Tamura at his heels. "What is it?"

"He has a high fever," Spock repeated, answering both at once.

M'Benga bent over the limp figure, checking his condition; he seemed a little uncertain - even in his concern for his bondmate Spock noticed it.

"It looks like pneumonia," the African said at last. "But I don't see how... Sir, perhaps you should call Dr. McCoy."

"No!" The faint whisper from the bed halted Spock as he reached for the intercom. He bent lower so that he could hear the half-delirious, but insistent plea.

"No, Spock. Bones first...promise me!"

"Jim..."

"Promise..." Kirk's hand closed tightly round Spock's wrist, and at last the Vulcan nodded reluctantly, taking the tape the Human was holding.

"Very well, Jim - I promise." Turning to M'Benga he continued, "Do what you can, Doctor. I will see Dr. McCoy myself."

"As you wish, Captain." M'Benga moved to the intercom. "M'Benga to sickbay. Get a med table to the Captain's cabin immediately. Tamura, go and get a hypo prepared - 10ccs streptocillin."

"Yes, Doctor."

Spock followed her into the corridor, keeping pace as she hurried along. "Nurse, will you be attending Mr. Kirk?"

"Normally yes, Captain, but with Dr. McCoy unwell, and Dr. M'Benga in charge of the case, as senior nurse I will be on call in sickbay."

"Excellent. I will shortly bring Dr. McCoy to sickbay. Your assistance - and your absolute discretion - will be required."

"Yes, Captain." She watched, puzzled, as he halted outside McCoy's door, then remembering her last orders, she hurried on.

"Captain!" Masters' low-voiced call halted Spock as he was about to press the buzzer.

Fear chilled the Vulcan. "Jim?"

"No news yet, sir. Dr. M'Benga hasn't got him to sickbay yet, after all. I just wanted to say - it's good to see you back, sir."

"Thank you, Miss Masters." Spock indicated the door. "How is Dr. McCoy?"

She shook her head. "Not good. It's psychological rather than physical,

Dr. M'Benga says - Dr. McCoy told him about it when the symptoms intensified. But...he's very depressed, sir. He agreed that you were ill when I explained the situation to him - he helped me cover up for you and agreed that no-one should be allowed to visit you while you were fevered, but he accepted the story about research without any question - I don't think he even realises that you were actually off the ship. He's been very...well, detached, almost uninterested in what you were doing. As if he didn't care, had stopped considering what anyone did as being of any relevance to him. It made covering up for you to him that much easier - but it's not been nice, seeing him so indifferent to everything."

Spock said slowly, "It is possible that even subconsciously he feels that we should have delayed any personal research until he was off the ship; that we should have stayed available to help him over the psychological shock of declaring his own death sentence."

"But you were successful?"

"Yes."

"Then that's all he needs. I'll be on the bridge, sir."

As she hurried away Spock pressed the buzzer for admission. "Come." He raised an eyebrow at the flat reply, but entered, to find McCoy in the act of pulling a clean shirt over his head.

"Oh, so you've finally surfaced, have you? Maybe you'll do me the honour of explaining what you've been up to. Oh, never mind - it's none of my business anyway."

"McCoy..." Spock's tone was very gentle, but the doctor paid no attention.

"I suppose you heard I've been dodging my duty shifts," he continued defensively. "Well, you needn't worry - I've sorted myself out. Never thought I'd fall victim to self-pity... Still, I'm ready to return to duty now. At least I can go out with some dignity."

"Bones, will you listen to me?" Spock caught the doctor's arms and shook him gently. "You don't need to make excuses to me, you should know that. As for dying, that's what I've come to tell you. It's not going to happen."

McCoy smiled at Spock's use of the affectionate nickname Kirk had given him. "I don't believe in miracles, Spock."

"No miracle, McCoy - a proven fact. The 'research' in which Jim and I were engaged...we didn't want to tell you beforehand in case things went wrong, but... I rebuilt my 'transporter', and we returned to my universe." He held out the tape. "We went for this - a tested cure for xenopolycythemia."

McCoy stared at him. "A...cure?"

"Guaranteed," Spock agreed.

McCoy swayed, and Spock caught him, supported him to the bed. He bent over him, worried, but after a moment he opened his eyes and stared up at the Vulcan, hope showing clearly. "It's not...too late?"

"It shouldn't be - you diagnosed the condition quickly. But the sooner you begin treatment, the better."

"But how? Where?..." McCoy took the tape and stared at it blankly.

"In the other universe, McCoy also contracted the disease. We discovered a cure among the records of the Fabrini. When we saw him, your counterpart willingly gave me the formula, and a copy of his research notes. It is fortunate that we still have much of this mission to complete - we will be hard pressed to adapt the research notes to make it seem like your own work."

"I can't take credit for another man's discovery!" McCoy protested.

"In this case, you have no choice. We certainly cannot reveal the true source of the cure. Take comfort from all the good you will be able to do."

"I can't believe it," McCoy murmured.

"It is true, nevertheless. Come, McCoy -- there is no need for further delay."

Together they walked to McCoy's office in sickbay, where the doctor slotted the tape into the viewer and studied it intently.

"Yes, I can follow that..." He scribbled a few notes on a pad. It was an unusual mixture, he thought, whoever first discovered this cure must have had a mind that worked in a most unorthodox fashion.

"That seems to be it," he grunted, pressing a button on his desk. Nurse Tamura came in almost at once, and he handed her the pad. "Nurse, I have a possible cure for xenopolycythemia. Gather together the requisite drugs immediately, please."

"Yes, Doctor."

They followed her into sickbay, and McCoy hoisted himself onto one of the beds while she scurried round; within a couple of minutes she was standing beside them again, the required items on a trolley.

Spock picked up a medical tricorder and operated it while Tamura mixed the drugs to the required formula. She then filled a hypo, and advanced on McCoy, who was looking just a little tense. She injected him, then stepped back.

"How fast does this drug work?" McCoy whispered.

"Very quickly," Spock told him. He consulted the tricorder again. "Yes. Another 10ccs, Nurse... Yes. That is sufficient. Doctor, your white corpuscle count is improving rapidly...and the haemoglobin count is also returning to normal. The flow of oxygen to all the cells of your body is back to its abundantly energetic level, and waste materials are again being removed effectively."

McCoy sat up, looking rather dazed. "A cure, truly?"

"Truly," Spock confirmed. As Tamura, grinning broadly, wheeled the trolley away, he continued, "The condition could recur, but a controlled diet will lessen the risk; and if it does, the drugs will again be as effective."

McCoy grinned, rather shakily. "Research!" he accused, craning his neck to study the pulsating indicators over the bed for a moment before he sank back onto the pillows.

"One of my more...satisfying projects, Doctor. Now, I suggest you get some sleep. I will return later."

He was halfway to the door when a sudden exclamation halted him in mid stride.

"Wait a minute!" McCoy was sitting up in bed, frowning. "Where's Jim?"

"Resting, as you should be," Spock replied shortly. "The experience was... very tiring for him."

"Is that so?" McCoy swung his legs off the bed. "Don't lie to me," he warned, standing up shakily. "I know Jim - if he was asleep on his feet he'd be in here now. Where is he? What happened to him?"

The Vulcan's shoulders slumped. "He is...very ill...unconscious. He collapsed in my cabin as we returned through the 'transporter'. Dr. M'Benga diagnosed pneumonia... He has him in sickbay, but cannot account for his condition...and I, of course, cannot explain..."

"You can to me." McCoy was already heading for the door. "You suspect he's been affected by the - uh - transporter?"

"It seems probable. I myself have experienced greater disturbances each

time I used it - a Human might be even more sensitive. Two crossings so close together...it could be that..."

"Anything else?"

"On Vulcan, he was interrogated by a group of Romulan spies - I will explain later - and he also shortly thereafter spent a full night in the open, without warmth or shelter, save what my body heat could provide."

"Hmmm. Sounds bad, Spock."

They had reached the intensive care unit. M'Benga straightened from the bed, his dark face relaxing with relief at the appearance of the Chief Medical Officer.

"It's all right - I'll take over now."

Spock positioned himself on the other side of the bed, resolutely controlling an incipient panic as he gazed down at the unconscious man.

Jim scarcely seemed to breathe; his long lashes cast an unwavering shadow on the waxen cheeks. Spock reached out and touched the smooth skin - so hot! - and raised his eyes in anguish to McCoy's face.

"I don't know," McCoy answered the unspoken question. "I'll do all I can - you know that. Spock, you can't do anything here for the moment - why not go back to the bridge? It...helps, sometimes, to keep busy."

"You are correct, of course. Here I am only in the way. You will call me if...?"

"As soon as there's any change," McCoy promised.

Fascinated, McCoy watched it happen, the deliberate donning of that calm mask of utter detachment; the intense dark eyes were suddenly as remote as space itself. Then, very quietly, the Vulcan walked to the door, and was gone.

For a moment the doctor stood, unmoving, for only now did he realise the price Jim - and Spock - had paid for his life. He wondered if the Vulcan realised it yet...

"Doctor? Dr. McCoy?" M'Benga's respectful interruption broke into his sombre thoughts, and he turned determinedly to the task in hand.

Spock's reappearance on the bridge produced welcoming glances, but no surprise, the Vulcan noted with relief; Masters had indeed covered well. For a time he found himself fully occupied in bringing himself up to date on the ship's log for the period of his absence. For the first week Jim had skilfully recorded his entries, subtly conveying the impression that the decisions he had taken had in fact been made in consultation with the Captain; thereafter the entries made by Charlene Masters conformed to the plan she had worked out with Kirk. Spock allowed himself to relax a little, one worry dispelled; it seemed that no-one suspected that the two senior officers had in fact been off the ship.

The assigned mission was proceeding smoothly, he noted. The medical check of the last colony visited had been conducted without any difficulty and the Enterprise was on her way to the next port of call. Kirk had ordered that the cruising time be used for routine overhaul and maintenance on the ship's systems - despite the quiet nature of the trip, the bridge was a hive of activity.

Routine matters occupied Spock until the end of his duty shift. He checked with sickbay, only to receive the expected answer, "No news," ate a hurried meal, and wandered aimlessly back to his quarters, fighting the temptation to go to sickbay, where he knew he would only be in the way - if there was anything he could do, McCoy would call him.

To keep his mind occupied, as well as removing any focus for an extra-universe transfer, Spock busied himself with dismantling the 'transporter'

apparatus that filled most of his cabin. It would not - he hoped - be needed again.

The mechanism reduced to a neatly-arranged heap of unidentifiable parts, he called Engineering and arranged for a crew to pick up the borrowed components and return them to store. He fancied that the dark-haired young woman in charge of the squad looked at him a little oddly, but dismissed the notion until, after the others had left, she approached him quietly.

"Captain...I'm afraid I can't return this to store."

'This' was a small but complex unit he had been forced to borrow to control the fine tuning needed to focus the 'transporter' - there had not been time to build what he needed. Delicate and expensive, it was normally kept under seal, available only when needed to the Chief Engineer, the First Officer or the Captain. He had intended to return it himself, discreetly - and, inexcusably, had forgotten.

"Thank you, Miss...?"

"McLeod, sir. Assistant Engineer McLeod."

"I will inform Miss Masters that I have returned the component."

She nodded and went out, leaving Spock to stare blankly round his cabin, restored once more to its accustomed neatness. Careless! Engineer McLeod must surely be wondering why the Captain had needed such a complex piece of equipment for his own use; she might mention it, rumours would start... Then he shrugged fatalistically; she was just as likely to consider the incident unimportant, none of her business, any further action on his part would only impress the matter on her mind. It demonstrated, though, how his exhaustion and worry for Jim had led him to neglect elementary precautions. Perhaps he should try and rest...

Crossing to the bed he lay down, but sleep refused to come - even the customary successful relaxation exercises failed to loosen his taut muscles. An attempt at meditation was a dismal failure - his mind kept returning to Jim, his bondmate, the friend he had lost only to find once again, the one man in the universe - in all the universes - who could fill the empty void where for so long his heart had been.

McCoy was safe - but Jim was dying because of it. Because he, Spock, had been so careless as to allow himself to be caught... He had recognised the Security Guard as he approached - there had been time to turn aside, avoid him ...but he had stood there, his brain refusing to give the command, watching the uncertainty in the Vulcan's eyes turn to recognition and determination.

And because of that hesitation, Jim had come looking for him.

Had they saved McCoy at the cost of Jim's life?

No. No. NO!

McCoy was alive, would live; he had the skill to save Jim.

But...why was Jim so ill? He had been very cold, shivering all night... but he had not complained of feeling unwell.

Could it have been some complication caused by going through the inter-universe barrier on a return mechanism designed for one and possibly only imperfectly repaired and adjusted for two?

For the moment, such questions were meaningless. All that mattered was that McCoy repay the debt... Debt? That wasn't fair - the doctor had not asked them to go...

McCoy was a good man, a valued and loyal friend, a skilled healer; his life was worth much. But - and Spock shuddered - this price was more than he would have been willing to pay.

The harsh signal of the intercom broke into his thoughts. "Sickbay - McCoy here."

"Doctor?" The single word was an anguished plea the Human could not refuse.

"No news, Spock. Can't sleep, huh? Neither can I... You might as well come down and wait here."

"At once, McCoy."

The isolation ward was dimly lit, but Spock's night vision allowed him to see clearly the still figure on the bed.

"He's quiet for the moment," McCoy whispered, "but he has spells of delirium. The fever remains high... I've done everything I can, it all depends now on his own will to live."

"And on his strength," Spock murmured in reply. The harsh, tortured breathing seemed to fill his mind with phantom pain. "If the shock of transfer weakened him...he might not have the strength to fight."

"Spock! Now don't go thinking that way. Neither of you could have known that a Human would be so quickly affected - you only experienced discomfort after several crossings."

Spock made no reply. After a moment he said, "May I sit with him?"

"Don't see why not. Can't do any harm - and if he's aware of your presence, it might help him."

"Thank you." Speculative eyes rested on the doctor's face, aware of the lines of exhaustion engraved there. "McCoy, go and rest."

"I can't - the crisis could come at any time."

"Please. As you said, you can do nothing more for the moment. Later... we may need you."

"I guess you're right." McCoy rubbed his jaw absently. "I'll go and lie down on the couch in my office. But call me if there's any change, okay?"

"Of course."

Alone with his bondmate, Spock sat down and took one of Kirk's hands in his, subconsciously registering the dry heat of the skin. Kirk looked thinner, the harsh fever burning away the flesh, leaving the fine bones of the face outlined in sculptured detail.

The Vulcan leaned closer, his free hand hovering over the Human's face, fingers spread for the mind touch that would lock them in deep meld. The incomplete bond-link was useless - Kirk's pain and fever set up an impassable barrier to the delicate thread - all day Spock had been compelled to keep his shields firmly between himself and the confused jumble that was Kirk's conscious mind.

A meld, though...with that deeper contact he could break through, touch Jim's living essence, comfort and strengthen the Human in his struggle...and that was the one thing he must not do.

Jim had spoken the bonding vow to him, had shyly granted him the right of entry - but his own words of so long ago forbade him to use his power.

"I will never touch your mind without your consent" - yet he could not ask that permission!

For a moment Spock's hand wavered - force contact, break his word...perhaps lose Jim's trust - but save his life...or allow the Human to die? - then he

withdrew it reluctantly. There was still time, the fever might break naturally... but if it did not he would force the contact, and trust that Kirk would understand and forgive him...as surely he must, for his bondmate would know that he could not face the prospect of being alone again.

Time crawled past on leaden feet, and still that harsh breathing laboured in the dim-lit room, still the unnatural heat of the hand he held seared his clutching fingers, and Spock at last began to know despair. Now he doubted that even the meld would help...he had waited too long...Kirk would die, and he would again be desolate, his life in ashes...

NO!

The time had come to use the meld; and if it failed... If it failed, he would use every ounce of strength he possessed to follow his companion.

The decision taken, it was surprising how calm he felt at a situation that would have horrified Commander Spock. Two of his Vulcan's strictest taboos broken - a meld without consent, and the deliberate resignation of life.

Yet, remembering the quiet joy in those determined eyes at the sight of his lost Captain, somehow Spock did not think that his tutor would blame him overmuch...

He leaned forward, closing his eyes, gathering the random thoughts and bringing them under control to achieve the serenity he wished to possess when he took his bondmate's mind for what might be the last time; then, extending his hand, he fitted his fingertips precisely into position on Kirk's face.

It took several seconds for the significance of what he was experiencing to filter into Spock's mind. The smooth skin under his fingers was slightly damp...and cool; the harsh, rasping breathing no longer grated painfully on his ears.

Spock swallowed convulsively - was this life, or...?

He raised his head, to see Kirk's chest rising and falling in the natural rhythm of breathing, and - more than he had dared hope - bright, clear eyes watching him affectionately.

"Jim!"

"I'm all right - just sleepy." Kirk gave an uncontrollable yawn. "Did we do it, Spock? Is McCoy...?"

"The cure was a complete success," Spock assured him, clasping the Human's fingers tightly. "But the price was almost... Jim, you must never risk crossing the barrier again."

"Let's hope neither of us has to." Kirk's free hand brushed Spock's face for a moment. "You've been worrying, haven't you?" he teased gently.

"Indeed." He wanted to say more, and could not; but his eyes spoke for him, conveying a message that brought a smile to Kirk's lips. "Sleep, my...my friend," the Vulcan continued softly. "All is well."

Rising, Spock released the hand he held, and drew the cover up around Kirk's shoulders. The Human was already asleep, the smile still lifting the corners of his mouth.

It was quite some time before Spock reached for the intercom to place the call to McCoy's office.

It was several days later. The three friends gathered in Spock's cabin; Kirk, discharged only that morning from sickbay, and still pale, sat in his accustomed place on the floor, leaning against Spock's knee; McCoy lounged opposite, a glass in his hand. The atmosphere was relaxed, but all three men

were conscious of a deep gratitude that their companionship was not, after all, to be broken.

McCoy had heard the whole story, and was still trying to come to terms with it all. Kirk and Spock were very casual about what they had done, treating the whole thing as some sort of game they had played, but McCoy was not fooled.

"All I can say is thank you," he said quietly. "I won't forget."

McCOY'S LOG

So I'm going to live after all. I still can't quite realise it.

But what I can realise are the appalling risks Jim and Spock took to get this cure for me. They treated so much of what happened as an enormous joke... and that tells me more clearly than anything else how dangerous the whole exploit was.

Strange how none of us ever realised that Spock was deserting when he stayed here. It seemed so much the right thing for him to do... But from what he said, his friends in the other universe also think he did the right thing.

I feel very sorry for the other McCoy. How lonely he must be... Yet he did all he could to get them back to me... Jim said very little about his meeting with that Scotty - but somehow I sense that he is no longer as troubled as he was by the memory. At least my counterpart has Scotty. But it must have been very bitter for him, when Spock said goodbye... I wonder how much of his own Kirk he saw in Jim?

They refuse to accept any credit for the discovery of the cure, either. They insist that I claim to have researched it, and have even offered to help me fake the evidence. However, I will insist that Jim, at least, accepts some credit for helping me with the research - as Science Officer, it would have been natural for him to have helped me. It will be harder to credit Spock, who in this universe was never a scientist, and it may be that to avoid suspicion he must go uncredited.

I wonder how much else of value was destroyed when Captain Spock destroyed Yonada here? Spock says that his Yonada was a treasurehouse, especially of medical knowledge. I can understand - intellectually - why the Captain acted as he did; it was a responsible decision, and one that I believe Spock too could make if he was forced to - although I think that Spock would have searched for some way to save the lives of those few survivors of the plague that destroyed Yonada and the last of the Fabrini civilisation.

Perhaps if I'd been on the ship at the time...but I was away on a course. All I ever saw were the log entries of the Captain's interview with the woman - Natira, I think her name was - who led the survivors. It was not pleasant viewing; she had suffered from the plague but recovered, and the ravages of the disease had left their mark. She must have been a very lovely woman, once...

There have been times when I've thought I was getting too old for this game, felt I'd like to settle down somewhere, start a practice...tackle illness rather than injury, measles rather than Rigellian Fever. Now, however, I've been given back years of life; there are plenty of doctors who have never flown in space, never wanted to. How can I abandon all my years of space experience to join them? No, this is my life. And when I do get too old for active service, I'll do what the other McCoy did; work in liason with a Starbase - probably Vulcan, heaven help me! - and also help train young space medics beyond the basics they get at Starfleet Academy.

I have been given back my life; that seems as good a use as any to make of it.

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The Admiral looked up as his secretary entered in response to his call.

"Lieutenant, what Starships are reasonably available at the moment? Are there any that could be recalled within the next week or two?"

The secretary looked thoughtful. "Yes, sir. The Yorktown is currently on a scientific mission to the **Gamma Drevi** system; the Potempkin is on a routine survey of the Zeta Minorum system; the Enterprise is on routine medical checks of colony planets in the - "

"The Enterprise," the Admiral cut in. "If the colony doctors have not called for help, there's nothing much wrong there. We can reassign one of the other ships to finish the medical checks once their own missions are over. And the Enterprise is a good ship - they've done well on diplomatic missions in the past. Recall the Enterprise immediately, Lieutenant. It could be a tricky job, and I think they're probably best equipped to handle it. Yes, it's just as well," he mused as his secretary went out, "that the Enterprise ~~is~~ on a mission she ~~can~~ be recalled from... Just as well..."